

# Close Watching

Fifteen Don't-Miss Movies for  
the Film Aficionado, 1922-1983

By R. J. Cardullo

Culicidae Architectural Press  
an imprint of Culicidae Press, LLC  
918 5TH ST  
Ames, IA 50010  
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FIFTEEN DON'T-MISS MOVIES FOR THE FILM AFICIONADO, 1922-1983

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ISBN-13: 978-1-68315-017-6

Book layout and design by polytekton. Cover image: composite of one of the final frames from Robert Altman's 1971 film *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, showing the close-up of Constance Miller (Julie Christie), and Fig. 9 of Louis Boucher's design for a non-intermittent film projector, US Patent 3,053,141 from September 11, 1962, filed on September 23, 1958.

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# **Introduction: The Film's the Thing**

## **The Film Experience**

Film editing, or the instantaneous replacement of one moving visual field with another, was once not part of our daily experience. Thus nothing in 400 million years of vertebrate evolution could have prepared us for the visual assault of cinema. Yet amazingly enough, the process succeeded and we became accommodated to the idea of motion pictures. More than this, a mysterious extra meaning was gained from the juxtaposition of two images that was not present in either of the shots themselves. In sum, we discovered that the human mind was predisposed to cinematic grammar as if it were an entirely natural, inborn language. It may indeed be inborn, because we spend one-third of our lives in the nightly world of dreams. There, images are fragmented and different realities collide abruptly with what seems to have great meaning. In this way we can see film editing as, probably unwittingly, employing the power and means of dream.

For many millions of years, then, human beings were apparently carrying within them the ability to respond to film and were unconsciously awaiting its arrival in order to employ their dream-faculty more fully. Some of us have long believed that, through more recent centuries, theater artists and audiences themselves had also been longing for the film to be invented even without a clue that there could be such a medium. Many tricks of stagecraft in those centuries (par-

ticularly the nineteenth) were, without knowing it, attempting to be cross-cuts and superimpositions, or double exposures. Some dramatists even imagined their work in forms and perspectives that anticipated the birth of the cinema (most notably, and excitingly, Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death* [1835]). In his essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today” (1944), Sergei Eisenstein shows how the novel itself—specifically, the novels of Charles Dickens—provided D. W. Griffith with a number of cinematic techniques, including equivalents to fades, dissolves, the breakdown into shots, and the concept of parallel editing. These novelistic and theatrical attempts at prognostication a few centuries earlier are puny stuff, though, because for millions of years, homo sapiens had been subliminally prepared for the intricacies of film, had indeed been getting ready for them every night. Indeed, in a sense the last century, the mere centenary of film’s existence, was the emotional and psychological goal of the ages—and continues to be into the twenty-first century.

When the first moving picture flashed onto a screen, the double life of all human beings thus became intensified. That double life consists, on the one hand, of actions and words and surfaces, and, on the other, of secrets and self-knowledges or self-ignorances, self-ignorings. That double life has been part of man’s existence ever since art and religion were invented to make sure that he became aware of it. In the past 150 years or so, religion has receded further and further as revealer of that double life, and art has taken over more and more of the function; when film art came along, it made that revelation of doubleness inescapable, in fact more attractive. To wit: on the screen are facts, which at the same time are symbols; for this reason, they invoke doubleness at every moment, in every kind of picture. They stir up the concealments in our lives, both those concealments we like and those we do not like; they shake our histories, our hopes, and our heartbreaks into consciousness. Not completely, by any means. (Who could stand it?) And not more grandly or deeply than do the other arts. But more quickly and surely, because these facts, these symbols do their stirring and shaking with visuals as well as with motion, serially and cumulatively.

Think of this process as applying to every frame of film and it is clear that when we sit before a screen, we run risks unprecedented in

human history. A poem may or may not touch us; a play or novel may never get near us. But movies are inescapable. (In the case of poor films, we often have the sensation of fighting our way *out* of them.) When two screen lovers kiss, in any picture, that kiss has a minimum inescapability that is stronger than in other arts—both as an action before us and a metaphor for the “kissingness” in our own lives. Each of us is pinned privately to such a kiss in some degree of pleasure or pain or enlightenment. In romances or tragedies, in period films or modern dramas, in musical comedies or historical epics, in westerns or farces, our beings—kissing or otherwise—are in some measure summoned up before us, in our own private visions. And I would like to suggest that the fundamental way, conscious or not, in which we determine the quality of a film is by the degree to which the re-experiencing of ourselves coincides with our pride, our shames, our hopes, our honor.

Finally, it follows, distinctions among movies arise from the way they please or displease us with ourselves: not *whether* they please or displease but *how*. This is true, I believe, in every art today; it is not a cinema monopoly. But in the cinema it has become more true more swiftly and decisively because film has a much smaller heritage of received aesthetics to reassess; because film is bound more closely to the future than other arts seem to be (the reason is that, by its very episodic or “journeying” form, film reflects for viewers the belief that the world is a place in which man can leave the past behind and create his own future); and because film confronts us so immediately, so seductively, and so shockingly (especially on the larger-than-life screen) with at least some of the truth about what we have been doing with ourselves. To the extent that film exposes the viewer to this truth about himself, in his experience of the world or of fantasy, in his options for action or for privacy, to the extent that he can thus accept a film as worthy of himself or better than himself—to that extent a film is necessary to him. And it is that necessity, I am arguing, that ultimately sets its value.

Throughout history, two factors have formed people’s taste in any art, their valuing of it, that is: knowledge of that art and knowledge of life. Obviously this is still true, but the function of taste seems to be altering. As formalist aesthetic canons have come to seem less and less tenable, standards in art and life have become more and more

congruent, and as a result the function of taste is increasingly the selection and appraisal of the works that are most valuable—and most necessary—to the individual's very existence. So our means for evaluating films naturally become more and more involved with our means for evaluating experience; aesthetic standards do not become identical with standards in life but they are certainly related—and, one hopes, somewhat braver.

Of course the whole process means that human beings feed on themselves, on their own lives variously rearranged by art, as a source of values. But despite other prevalent beliefs about the past connected with theology and religion, we are coming to see that people have always been the source of their own values. In the century in which this responsibility, this liberation, became increasingly apparent—the twentieth—the intellect of man simultaneously provided a new art form, the film, to make the most of it.

That art form is obviously still with us, and now, in the twenty-first century, more than ever, it seems. And its critics proliferate in number, in part because of what I describe above: the “personal” element involved in the watching of any movie, and the ease nowadays with which, through the Internet, one can communicate that personal response to others. If, as Oscar Wilde once said, “The highest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (48)—because only by intensifying his own personality, as it were, could the critic interpret the personality and work of others—then film criticism must be an even higher form.

## The Critic as Humanist

As the highest form of autobiography, such criticism is necessarily humanistic in its approach. That approach sees films as an art like other arts, and film criticism as a human activity practiced by the educated, cultured person. Like the classical humanism of the Renaissance, such criticism asserts the dignity and worth of individuals and their capacity for self-realization, in this instance through the application of reason as well as feeling to the activity (followed by the recollection) of watching a movie. Thus the humanistic approach to cinema attempts to make sense of the individual's emotional and intellectual, *personal* experience of a film, to

draw conclusions about the value of that experience, and to communicate that value to others.

Seeing in film, then, the same potential for art that countless generations have traditionally found in painting, music, and literature—the kind of art that lifts the human spirit and stimulates the human mind—the humanist film critic looks for a similar aesthetic experience in the movies. What can movies tell us about the human condition? How do they reflect an intellectual interest in politics, religion, history, or philosophy? What kinds of ideas are hidden beneath the surface of a film? How can we interpret its symbols? How do form and content interact to convey the filmmaker's meaning? Is there an artist behind the creation of a film? What relationship exists between this particular film or this genre of film and the world outside the movie theater? How shall we rank the quality of this motion picture compared to some ideal excellence or compared to the best cinema that has been produced in the past? These questions are familiar, for they are the same ones asked of any art form. They are not specific to film, but specific to aesthetic inquiry in general.

Because of the interest in film criticism displayed by people from a wide variety of fields, the humanistic approach presupposes that writer and reader have a certain familiarity with the general principles of aesthetic inquiry as articulated by Western culture from the time of the Greeks to the present. Film is simply assumed to be of the same order as other art forms and, therefore, subject to similar investigation. This was not always the case for the cinema, of course, because traditional definitions of art imply a high moral purpose and a complex aesthetic scheme. Art has always been defined as something qualitatively different from entertainment, in other words, and most commentators, at least in the United States, saw movies as nothing more than entertainment until after World War II.

W. R. Robinson, writing in the late 1960s, exemplifies the change of view that had taken place and that still characterizes the way in which the intellectual community looks at film. He justifies critical inquiry into movies by suggesting that they make the same appeal to the spectator as do the other arts, an assertion that also implies that the spectator is a cultured individual familiar with such appeals. Robinson

states that a movie engages the viewer in a moral and aesthetic dialogue that demands some sort of response, even if only to decide whether the movie was worth attending in the first place:

In short, everyone instinctively recognizes that a movie—all art, in fact—invites him to exercise his taste in making a value judgment. He senses that a value assertion has been made and that a reply is demanded of him. And except for the most diffident, everybody also senses that he is qualified to reply. (119)

Surely everyone seeing a film will make that first value judgment, even if it is based only on immediate emotional grounds; the humanist simply goes further, probing more deeply into those initial responses, recognizing the potential for moral and intellectual interchange.

The humanist, then, is largely self-defined, and perhaps is simply a person who takes an interest in the subject at hand—here, film. A general knowledge of literature, drama, and the fine arts will help him to indulge that interest, to relate the cinematic experience to other artistic experiences. For the humanist, critical investigation into, intellectual curiosity about, and logical analysis of all aspects of experience, inside as well as outside the artwork, are habitual responses to life. Looking closely at the filmic experience, trying to discern there the mark of human excellence or potential, is no different from looking closely at the experience of reading novels, viewing paintings, or listening to music. The humanist seeks to understand human nature and mankind's place in the scheme of things, asking such traditional questions as "Who are we?" and "What is life all about?"

As Robert Richardson has pointed out, the answers to these questions may be found in movies:

Perhaps man is no longer the measure of all things, but man remains the measure of the world on film. The films of Jean Renoir, for example, show just this emphasis on the desirability of being human; it is the main theme of *Grand Illusion* and of other films. *La strada*, revolving around three people whom

psychology would call abnormal, nevertheless manages to find and then insist on humanness in the animal Zampanò, in the half-wit Gelsomina, and in the Fool. The film has the pace and power of a Greek tragedy; its theme, like that of Sophocles' *Ajax*, might be said to be an examination of what it is to be human. (128-129)

The humanist, finally, looks for representations in film of general human values, the truths of human experience as they relate to the common or universal aspects of existence: birth, death, love, aggression, happiness, sorrow. He seeks an answer to the question, "What is there in this film or in my experience of it that will help me understand the variety and complexity of the human heart and mind?" Finding out more about a particular film, a genre, a director's concerns and interests, or the influences of society on the production of movies—all of these can make the moviegoing experience more meaningful, and all of them make up the province of the humanistic critic and his readers. It is only such an alchemy of the mind that can enlarge or expand the merely physical and emotional sensation of watching shadows in the dark.

## **The History of Film for Cultured Audiences**

By the time the movies became a reality, at the end of the nineteenth century, the intellectual community had clearly demarcated the differences between highbrow and lowbrow art, between artworks seriously aimed at discerning audiences and those aimed at the unwashed masses. Movies were popular entertainment similar in form and function to dime novels, circuses, and the music hall, and thus were not worth either experiencing or commenting upon as far as intellectuals were concerned. Nevertheless, over the years, there appeared a few cultured individuals who found in the movies something of human relevance for the discerning mind.

Vachel Lindsay, an American poet, in 1915 wrote a book-length study, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, in which he attempted to distinguish the properties of film from those of other arts and to synthesize the properties of other arts within the one art of cinema. In the following year, Hugo Münsterberg, an eminent psychologist on the faculty

at Harvard, explored the psychological relationship between the film viewer and the screen image in his book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Writing near the very beginning of the history of motion pictures, Münsterberg was aware of the way in which early films recorded the activities of the world in front of the camera, thereby performing an educational or instructional, descriptive function. But he makes an excellent case for the position that the motion picture's greatest strength lies in its ability to portray human emotion. "To picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay" (48), writes Münsterberg. He also goes on to suggest that, as in some of the other arts, the representation of the human heart and mind on film successfully raises moral issues; for him, film narrative presents the opportunity for making moral judgments, both on the part of the moviemaker and of the audience. The truth of the representation must be tested against the truth of the viewer's own experience of the world.

Though, in one sense, these early books by a poet and a psychologist might be classed as works of film theory rather than as evaluations of specific films, they were both written by cultured individuals who were not primarily film scholars or critics. And both felt compelled to argue that, despite continued neglect by the intellectual community, the cinema deserved a place alongside the time-honored arts of literature, music, and painting. For the most part, Lindsay's and Münsterberg's rhetoric failed to convince their peers—at least in the United States. In Europe, on the other hand, intellectuals had been attracted to filmmaking from the birth of the medium. (France, for example, had initiated the extensive filming of classic plays and novels well before the First World War.) So it is not surprising that all over Europe—in Paris, Berlin, Moscow—during the 1920s, intellectuals and artists talked and wrote about the movies as the equivalent of the other arts. Between the world wars in America, however, intellectuals scarcely noted the existence of the medium. There were, of course, some thoughtful reviews of specific films in major periodicals by critics more commonly given to writing about high-class literature. Edmund Wilson, Aldous Huxley, and Robert E. Sherwood were among the few who did not condescend when they occasionally wrote about the films of the 1920s and 1930s.

Other reviewers who wrote regularly about specific films from the 1930s through the 1950s, in magazines intended for a cultured readership, and who accepted the film as worthy of intellectual scrutiny, included Harry Alan Potamkin, Otis Ferguson, Robert Warshow, and James Agee. These writers, though clearly identifiable under the title “reviewers,” also wrote what can be considered humanistic criticism, since their perceptions about film included thoughtful references to contemporary ideas in psychology, sociology, politics, and aesthetics that would be understood by a cultured audience. They did not simply recount the plot of a film and say whether they liked it or not, but went further in trying to relate their experiences of individual movies to the intellectual concerns of the day. (Robert Warshow, for example, in his 1954 essay titled “The Westerner,” about the hero of western movies, as well as in his 1948 piece “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” discusses not simply a number of films, but also the American fascination with violence.)

Nevertheless, the intellectual community as a whole did not make film one of its concerns until after the Second World War. In part because of the pressure of returning veterans, some of whom had seen non-Hollywood films while stationed abroad, and in part because of an increase in experimental or avant-garde filmmaking by members of the art community who were working in academic departments, film societies sprang up on college campuses all over the U.S. In addition to providing inexpensive entertainment to students making do on the G.I. Bill, the film societies introduced Americans to foreign films like those from Italy, which attempted to treat postwar problems realistically, to present life as it was lived and not as it was dramatized or glamorized in the well-known, predictable genres of most Hollywood films. The experience of watching such movies invited more organization on the part of film societies, and soon more or less random exposure to the classics of world cinema, whether they were silents or sound pictures, became codified into college courses.

The result was that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, a large number of college-educated Americans had come to realize that movies existed which were not simply escapist entertainment, but which held possibilities for human enrichment similar to the possibilities offered

by the more traditional arts of drama, painting, and literature. The early films of Ingmar Bergman (e.g., *The Seventh Seal*, 1957) and Federico Fellini (e.g., *La strada*, 1954) were the first to be reviewed and praised by highbrow critics in prestigious journals. The first films of the French New Wave—François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour*—won prizes at Cannes in 1959. Anyone who claimed to be an intellectual, a cultured individual who was aware of the artistic trends in contemporary life, had to see these pictures. A circuit of art-house movie theaters eventually appeared that featured such films, which were distributed all over the country. People came not to forget their cares, as they did at Hollywood movies, but to think about the difficulties and problems of living in the nuclear age.

And a lively and informed criticism of these movies began to appear in print, not only in intellectual magazines like the *Nation* and the *New Republic* but also in hundreds of highly literate books by writers from a wide variety of disciplines, as the intellectual community sought to map out this new area of study. In the early 1970s, moreover, several universities began to sponsor new journals devoted to a wide-ranging, widely practiced exploration of the cinema, such as *Film Heritage* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*. During the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, however, as film studies in the academic world became more specialized and thereby “legitimized,” evolving on many campuses into doctorate-granting departments, fewer and fewer writers from other disciplines felt comfortable about making the crossover into movie criticism.

Nonetheless, the humanistic approach is still alive and well anywhere and any time so-called generalists, however few in number, decide to analyze movies. In addition, one cannot forget the thriving interest in humanist film criticism registered by the countless number of students in introductory and advanced film classes who write papers. For the most part, these students are also generalists, familiar with the terms of humanist inquiry. Their speculations and intuitions about film topics, as any film teacher can attest, are often as eye-opening and enlightening as those of any professional academic. All students should be encouraged to realize that they

might, upon careful reflection, produce a perception about the cinema that is highly original—and very good.

## **The Personal Essay and the Pleasures of Intuitive Interpretation**

The humanistic approach to film criticism is thus open to all. It requires only a general background in the arts, the experience of filmgoing, and the habit of reading and writing. It presupposes that criticism—looking rationally and sympathetically at the world in an attempt to understand it and its inhabitants better—is an important human function. At the same time, criticism confers more than simply understanding on its practitioners: it also gives great pleasure, the very human pleasure of discovering something about a film that is new and original. This pleasure occurs during the critical act itself, when a person sits down to organize into written form the vague and ephemeral impressions of the actual experience of moviegoing. Such writing is hard work and doesn't always reach the highest level; great thoughts and insights don't always come. Still, something about the concentration necessary for writing can coalesce and distill distinct ideas and feelings into substantial critical discourse.

The first step for the potential writer, of course, is to think of films as something more than mere escapist entertainment for a mass audience, and simultaneously to draw the conclusion that more than a cursory glance at the movies can yield intellectual satisfactions. From this perspective, the humanist critic can find significant perceptions to express not only about the manifestly complex films made by foreign filmmakers, but also about mainstream movies as well. The important point is that humanists look inward, examining their own responses in more than a cursory way, and try to understand what it was that produced their initial reaction to the picture in question. People usually know whether they liked or disliked a particular movie; but the humanist is not satisfied by such simplistic response: he wants to know precisely why he liked or disliked the work. What was it, in particular, that made the film good or bad? Or what made the film so boring, pretentious, thrilling, saddening, hysterical, or rewarding? The humanist trusts intuition first, then tries rationally to elaborate the reasons why

he intuitively responded in this or that way. It is the very articulate sharing of his responses to the cinema on a cultivated level that distinguishes the humanist film critic from the mere movie reviewer.

Paul Ricoeur, a noted French philosopher, has described the process of the critic's immersion in a text, cinematic or otherwise, as a movement through three stages. The first he calls "understanding" (71ff.), the moment when a text makes its power clear to the person experiencing it. Having seen a particular film, for example, the viewer is struck by the insistence with which it urges itself on his own life. We are all aware that some films do not have such an appeal; we see them, pass the time, and forget about them. When this recognition of insistence or pertinence does take place, however, the text demands some "explanation." This is Ricoeur's second stage. Dudley Andrew, in *Concepts of Film Theory* (1984), says that the process of "explanation" is necessarily a reductive one, as the text is broken down into its various parts in order to unlock its hold on us. "The text is situated in its various contexts . . . and is subjected to . . . study and critique until the particularity of its appeal is explained as an effect of these generating forces" (181).

In a sense this second stage of analysis may remove us from the power of the text as felt during the moment of "understanding," the first stage. But Ricoeur goes on to say that a third stage, "comprehension," follows. Here a return to the work, bolstered and enlarged by the explanatory process, renews—in a stronger and more comprehensive way—the initial sense that the viewer had of the text's insistent meaning for his own life. "Comprehension," Andrew writes, "is synthetic in that it listens to the wholeness of the text rather than breaking it down into parts: further, it responds to the cues it finds in the work, initiating a project of meaning that is never complete" (182). The relationship between the text and the spectator thus becomes a living one. That is, one can return to certain films again and again because they never lose their ability to yield new or more elaborate meaning. It is this kind of film that humanist critics prefer to write about.

It should be mentioned at this point that the very broadness or generalness of the humanistic approach, its emphasis on an individual's intuitive insight into and sensitive interpretation of a film, is also

purported to be this approach's major weakness. Though almost certainly leading to enrichment of the movie experience for those who read criticism, then go back to a film and see it in a new light, the humanist method is often criticized for its lack of intellectual rigor—that is, for its theoretically unfounded, methodologically unscientific, and unashamedly emotional assertions. Many feel that humanism is not a method at all, but simply a question of elevated taste; that it is only as good as the sensibility of the critic, only as convincing as the rhetoric of his prose. This approach causes problems for those who see the aim of criticism as the creation of an orderly, systematic body of knowledge about a subject, a body of knowledge aimed at achieving a consensus on the part of all informed participants. After all, one can always disagree with someone's attempts to justify his intuitive idea of what such-and-such a film "really meant," or an instinctive view of what makes a film "great," by simply saying, "It didn't strike me that way at all." Truly objective criteria upon which to base one's critical claims are not and could not be part of the humanistic approach to the cinema or any other art.

Nevertheless, when an article or a book makes intelligent sense, when we read someone's thoughts and feelings about a particular film and the shock of recognition occurs—"Oh, sure, now I see. I was thinking it had to be something like that, but this says it all. He hit the nail right on the head!"—we feel the force of the humanistic approach. And despite the claims of the more methodical approaches, perhaps that fellow-feeling or shock of recognition is all we can ask for in the world of the arts, where human experience is the primary area of investigation. Physics may be able to argue for an objective quality to its findings about certain aspects of the natural world, but the perception of a film seems likely at all times to have a subjective element to it. And here, perhaps, is where the work of a humanist may be valid in more ways than the work of other, more specialized writers of film criticism.

Those academic specialists, like journalistic reviewers at the other end of the spectrum, are essentially engaged in a non-aesthetic enterprise, one that in the case of the academics may instead be termed sociological, historical, political, psychological, anthropological, or even "linguistic." I am thinking of such methodologies as semiotics,

(neo)formalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and neo-Freudianism, feminism and gender studies, (post)structuralism and deconstruction, and race-and-ethnicity, none of which I will attempt to define because the meaning is either abundantly transparent or hopelessly obscure. What these approaches all have in common is the attempt to turn film studies into a (pseudo)science and to use film as grist for one kind of ideological mill or other. This is not to say that there is *no* truth to any of these methods, only that each thinks *its* truth is the only truth and tries, through name-calling, to cow non-believers into public submission. No humanist (or genuine scientist, for that matter) would be guilty of such a crime against art—and hence humanity—for a humanist is by his very nature a pluralist with an interest in the human condition as it is experienced, rather than as it is “theoretized” or prescribed.

## The Work at Hand

This particular humanistic collection of film criticism, *Close Watching: Fifteen Don't-Miss Movies for the Film Aficionado, 1922-1983*, attempts to offer readable, “unscientific” analyses, in survey-form, of what the author considers to be some of the most important international, as well as American, films and film artists during a sixty-year period: from the onset of the feature-film era to 1983, or from a relatively early point in the history of motion pictures to the period just before the emergence of a new (digital) aesthetic. Written not only with the educated viewer, or art-house connoisseur, in mind but also directed at university students, these essays cover some of the central films—and central issues raised—in today’s world cinema courses and try to provide students with practical models to help them improve their own writing and analytical skills.

From a glance at the list of entries in *Close Watching*, the reader will quickly discover not only that most of the films treated are international in origin, but that most of them are also “art films.” Hence, with a few happy exceptions, American entertainment movies—the bulk of the U.S. cinematic output—are excluded, and this requires some comment. To wit: by about 1920, long after American films had cornered the world market, a rough, debatable, but persistent generalization had come into being: America made entertainment movies, while

Europe (and later, the rest of the world) made art films. Even back then some observers knew that there were great exceptions on both sides of that generalization, particularly the second part. (*Every* filmmaking country makes entertainment movies; they are the major portion of every nation's industry. But no country's entertainment movies have had the success of American pictures.) That generalization has become increasingly suspect as it has become increasingly plain that good entertainment films cannot be made by the ungifted; further, that some directors of alpine talent have spent their whole careers making works of entertainment.

Nonetheless, for compact purposes here, the terms “entertainment” and “art” can serve to distinguish between those films, however well made and aesthetically rewarding, whose original purpose was to pass the time; and those films, however poorly made and aesthetically pretentious, whose original purpose was the illumination of experience and the extension of consciousness. In this view, the generalization about American and European films has some validity—less than was assumed for decades, still some validity. And that validity has determined the make-up of the collection of pieces in *Close Watching: Fifteen Don't-Miss Movies for the Film Aficionado, 1922-1983*. Which is to say that I write here predominantly about films made beyond American borders.

To be sure, I wish there were more American art films, but the nature of movie production in the United States—which is almost totally commercial and unsubsidized—prevents their creation. There was some hope, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, that this situation would change due to the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the increase in foreign-film importation (and therefore foreign influence), the soaring expense of moviemaking, and the rise of the independent, “personal” film (to satisfy, as it were, the increasing number of “personal” critics such as Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Dwight Macdonald). However, American filmmakers soon learned that “independent” means independent only of the old assembly line. Indeed, in some ways the new system is more harried, less self-confident than the old studio procedure, where picture-people knew precisely what they were doing, or thought they did, and for whom they were doing it.

Put another way, independent production now means that, for each project, a producer not only needs to acquire a script and director and actors and facilities and distribution, he also has to acquire an audience—possibly a different audience for each film he produces, or at least not a relatively dependable general, homogeneous audience as in the past. No longer, then, is there any resemblance in the movie industry to a keeper throwing fish to trained seals. Making motion pictures is now much more like publishing books: each venture is a separate business enterprise, a separate risk and search. And the moment “personal” films do not make any money, they stop getting made in large numbers—as they have already done in comparison with the period of the late ’60s and early ’70s, when we saw such personal, and in some cases hugely moneymaking, pictures as *Easy Rider*, *The Hired Hand*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Wanda*, *The Conversation*, *Badlands*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Alice’s Restaurant*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Rain People*, *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and many more.

The operative term at the start of the previous sentence is “money.” The operative term in *Close Watching: Fifteen Don’t-Miss Movies for the Film Aficionado, 1922-1983*, by contrast, is “art.” I have nothing against money (who really does?), but I like my art divorced from it, or divorced from dependence on it, as much as possible. I hope the reader will agree and read on with pleasure—as well as profit. The other operative term in *Close Watching* is “international.” The book is structured as a kind of journey around the world, with chronological stops in the following ten countries: Germany, the United States, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Japan, Denmark, Great Britain, and Australia. (All the “stops,” or entries, are supplemented by bibliographies, filmographies, film credits, film images, a guide to film analysis, a glossary of film terms, and topics for writing and discussion.) All the geographically representative films treated here are also artistic landmarks—and therefore don’t-miss pictures—in one way or another, or in several ways: because of their very subject matter; because of their style and technical or formal advances; because of the historical periods, social settings, or religious backgrounds that gave impetus to their creation; and, ultimately, because of each picture’s unique, finely observed vision of the world. Close watching—and happy journeying!

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*Nosferatu* (1922), F. W. Murnau, German

## F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*

### Expressionism and Dracula

F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) was the first film version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); some ninety-five years later, it remains the most intelligent adaptation of this Victorian novel. Given the way in which Stoker's vampire aristocrat has haunted popular culture since the first publication of the book, the figure's social-cum-ideological can scarcely be exaggerated. Conceived at the height of Victorian sexual repression, the Count Dracula of the novel embodies, to varying degrees of explicitness, all the sexual dreads that Western culture still has not exorcised or come to terms with: non-procreative sexuality, promiscuity, bestiality, bisexuality, incest, even (indirectly, through the preferences of the vampirized Lucy) the sexuality of children. Indeed, much of our sexual social history can be traced through the transformations the Count has undergone from Stoker's novel to *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, as directed by Francis Ford Coppola in 1992.

With his origins in sexual repression, Count Dracula transplants very logically and easily into the climate and ethos of German expressionism, where he becomes a symbol of repressed tyranny more than repressed sexuality. German expressionism itself was heavily indebted to Sigmund Freud's theories of repression and the unconscious, which also subsequently influenced the surrealist movement. The essential difference between the two movements lies in their contrasting inflections of Freudian theory: the surrealists, for their

part, were committed to liberation and the overthrow of repressive bourgeois norms whatever the costs, whereas the expressionists consistently conceived of the repressive forces as evil, their release cataclysmic. The extraordinary power, and continuing fascination, of Murnau's film are rooted in this vision.

Critics such as Robin Wood, Lane Roth, Gilberto Perez, Tom Milne, and Lotte Eisner have discussed certain expressionist features of Murnau's *Nosferatu*, but none has conceived of it as a fully expressionist work. One reason for this is that most critics' understanding of the expressionist movement, in drama as well as in film, is superficial. For them a film such as Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is expressionistic less for what it means than for how it looks with its "oppressively murky, artificial sets" (Perez, 150). And for Robin Wood, a discussion of expressionism in *Nosferatu* need only be limited to a catalogue of its stylistic manifestations in the film—in other word, to how the film looks with its "vampire's castle jutting up from the rock, the strange geometrical patterning of arch-forms . . . , the use of 'unnatural' camera angles . . . , the trick effects" (9).

Expressionism is primarily a drama of the mind, however, whether on stage or on screen. It is concerned with the essence, not the surface, of reality, and therefore, more than other artistic styles, it must be defined not by its own surface characteristics but by the essence they seek to embody. Expressionism is thus designed to get away from actuality and to satisfy the desire to probe fundamental truths of human nature and society by presenting them through dramatized fantasy and mysticism. And expressionism gets away from actuality through a retreat into the mind and, at the same time, paradoxically, through a projection of that mind onto the world: by externalizing or "expressing" what is inside the mind, by making "outer" what is "inner."

If impressionism could be said to be the subjective rendering of the visible world, then, expressionism is the subjective expression of an inner world, an internal vision. For this reason many expressionist plays, dating back to August Strindberg's *To Damascus* (1898), a progenitor of the movement, have been called "Ich-dramas," or dramas of the "I," the self, on a journey through the mind's inner reaches and the world's outer ones. Many expressionist works, moreover, are

either explicitly or implicitly political: they react against the social tyranny of the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the political tyranny of demagogues, on the other.

## **Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Expressed**

*Nosferatu*'s expressionism has been overlooked, I believe, largely because of its natural, rather than fantastic settings: the landscape of the Carpathian Mountains in East-Central Europe, the narrow streets and closely packed houses of a small town on the Baltic Sea (where Murnau shot what we are to take as Bremen, Germany, in 1838—more on this time period later). But the film may be regarded as the “Ich-drama” of Hutter (Jonathan Harker in Stoker's *Dracula*), and the two other chief characters—Ellen, his wife (Mina in the novel), and Nosferatu (Dracula)—may be seen as aspects of Hutter's self.

Hutter is no conscious, active rebel against society, as are many expressionist heroes, themselves often extensions of their creators. He is, rather, a passive instrument of Murnau's mythic design; himself no social or political rebel, Murnau does not make a rebel of his alter ego, Hutter. A witness to or observer of the German sociopolitical scene, Murnau makes Hutter a witness to or observer of the relationship between Ellen and Nosferatu. Hutter himself is “narrated” by a fictitious contemporary of his who, one can say, serves as a surrogate for Murnau: Johann Cavallius, historian of the city of Bremen, whose diary provides the story of Hutter's trip Transylvania, in western Romania, and then of Nosferatu's descent on Bremen.

Professor Van Helsing himself—who is Dracula's nemesis in Stoker's novel—plays only a small part in Murnau's film (where he is renamed Professor Bulwer). He is obviously not Nosferatu's antagonist in Murnau and his screenwriter Henrik Galeen's adaptation: both Annie (Lucy in the novel) and Ellen ask that the professor be called once Nosferatu has made his presence felt in Bremen, but the professor does not go to them and in fact can do nothing to stop Nosferatu. Murnau thus reduces Van Helsing's role significantly so that Ellen can become simultaneously Nosferatu's destroyer and his victim.

Hutter, for his part, is clearly linked to Ellen—as an aspect of his self or ego—through marriage. They have recently been mar-

ried, seem happy (the film begins with Hutter picking flowers for his wife), and together symbolize the bourgeois “correctness” of the Weimar Republic (1919–33), during which *Nosferatu* was made. He is a clerk in a real-estate office in their hometown of Bremen. His boss, Knock (Renfield in the novel), asks him to close a property deal—for a house directly opposite his and Ellen’s—with Count Orlok, known as Nosferatu, of Transylvania. Surprisingly, Hutter is more than happy to go, even though the trip will take him away for months from his bride. He even seems exultant when he tells Ellen that she cannot travel with him, that she must not risk the danger of crossing the Carpathian Mountains.

On one level, Hutter volunteers to make the long trip to Count Orlok’s castle in order to improve his own position in the real-estate office at the same time as he earns his commission. On another level, however—the mythic or symbolic (not the psychological) one—this is the first indication we get of Hutter’s attraction-repulsion, is love-hate, for his wife, his own bourgeois existence, and the precarious democratic structure that supports it. In place of this humdrum, stifling existence, he gets to travel on horseback to a remote and different place and to do business with a count. But his journey will become less a journey away from Bremen than into himself, and as much a linking up with Nosferatu as a leavetaking from Ellen.

## **Nosferatu, Tyranny, and History**

Hutter is linked to Nosferatu, as an aspect of himself, through business. Hutter may work for Knock, but the latter is obviously demented and acts under the long-range influence of Nosferatu. That influence is an aspect of Nosferatu’s tyranny, about whose depiction in a group of German films from 1920 to 1924 Siegfried Kracauer once wrote the following:

In this type of film, the Germans of the time—a people still unbalanced, still free to choose its regime—nursed no illusions about the possible consequences of tyranny; on the contrary, they indulged in detailing its crimes and [the] sufferings it inflicted. Was their imagination kindled by the fear of bolshe-

vism? Or did they call upon these frightful visions to exorcise lusts which, they sensed, were their own and now threatened to possess them? (It is, at any rate, a strange coincidence that, hardly more than a decade later, Nazi Germany was to put into practice that very mixture of physical and mental tortures which the German screen then depicted.) (77)

In 1921-22, when *Nosferatu* was made, Germany was going through a period of great instability, the result of its defeat in World War I and the overthrow of its traditional monarchy. The new German government was an attempt at democracy, but many officials of the Weimar Republic had rightist political leanings. At the same time, as Kracauer suggests, bolshevism was taking root in Germany. The country was soon thrown into economic and social plight by the collapse of the monetary currency: bread lines began forming, riots broke out almost everywhere, and Adolf Hitler made his first appearance on the political scene. Kracauer comments, “The Germans obviously held [at this point] that they had no choice other than the cataclysm of anarchy or a tyrannical regime” (88).

If Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was a novel of Victorian sexual repression, then, Murnau’s *Nosferatu* is a film of Weimarian autocratic repression. At one end, in Bremen, there is Ellen, a pallid, emaciated figure who stands for the weakness or shakiness of German democracy in the early 1920s, and whose recent marriage to Hutter represents their attempt to fall into line with the surface order of Bremen’s bourgeois life—with its carefully charted avenues, tightly knit families, and fastidiously kept living quarters. At the other end, in Transylvania, there is Nosferatu, himself a pallid, emaciated figure who, in his shadowiness, stands for the subterranean impulse toward autocracy in the German people of the time: he represents their skeleton in the closet, as it were, ready to emerge and declare itself at any moment. Nosferatu lives alone in his huge castle, and it is as if, in his will to absolute power, he has become the sole inhabitant of his realm: he rules all, he *is* all. Virtually unseen, Nosferatu emerges only at night, sleeping by day in an earth-filled coffin located in a crypt beneath his castle—and also sleeping in such a coffin in the hold of the ship that carries him to Bremen.

The arch is a visual leitmotiv in the film used by Murnau precisely to characterize Nosferatu as a repressed, vampiric force who is always emerging from under arches or arch-shapes that seem to be trying unsuccessfully to press down upon him, often forming a background of darkness. The arch is also used to link Nosferatu to Hutter. There is an arch over the bed in which Hutter sleeps at the inn, just before he enters the vampire's domain. When he enters Nosferatu's castle, Hutter passes under a large arch, just as, when Nosferatu enters Bremen after disembarking from the ship *Demeter*, he walks beneath a large arch. When they meet for the first time, Nosferatu emerges from one arch, Hutter from another, and then they face each other under yet another arch. Further, Hutter's daytime movement through a series of indoor arches is later mirrored by Nosferatu's nighttime passage under several similar arches on his way to suck the sleeping Hutter's blood.

In between the arched demagogry of Nosferatu and Transylvania and the straitened democracy of Ellen and Bremen, or beyond them both, lies anarchy, symbolized in the film by the raw or uncontrolled nature over which Hutter must travel to reach Nosferatu's castle. (This anarchy is also symbolized by Hutter's boss and Nosferatu's agent, Knock, who becomes so demented that he reverts to erratic, animal-like behavior once he escapes into the countryside from his madman's prison cell.) The choice for Murnau's expressionist hero is between a fragile yet suffocating democracy, on the one hand, and a steady yet equally oppressive tyranny, on the other hand—with the anarchy of rough terrain, spooked horses, eerie birds, and fierce jackals in between these two poles.

## **Visual Style, Telescopng, and Meaning**

As for the trick photography (the speeded-up coach, the incredibly rapid loading of a carriage with earth-filled coffins), the shots in negative, the odd camera angles, the “supernaturally” opening doors in the castle, and the “supernaturally” manned sailing ship (the entire crew of which Nosferatu has liquidated) that takes the vampire to Bremen, one explanation is not only that these are “endistancing devices” separating the vampire’s world from that of the German town (Perez, 153), but also that these devices are the work of the expressionist hero’s

consciousness. To underline this point, Murnau has Hutter insist in a letter to Ellen from Transylvania that, even though the frightening things happening to him seem real, they are all part of a dream. That is, the hero's consciousness seems to be projecting onto the tyrant's world the extraordinary power that it *imagines* this world to have.

Low-angle shots, for instance, make Nosferatu loom up in the frame, and shots in negative suggest that this despot has the ability, not only to speed up motion, but also to reverse the usual positions of light and shadow on objects. That Murnau filmed *Nosferatu*'s outdoor shots "in the world" or on location, not in the studio, lends the scenes of trick photography and "supernatural" motion a reality, a convincingness, that they would otherwise not have. These scenes appear to be not merely the products of someone's febrile mind, as they would had they been shot within the confines of a studio, but the products of entire world at the mercy of an omnipotent, nearly godly—or satanic—tyrant.

Murnau may have set parts of this story in the real world, but he did not set it in the contemporary world of 1921-22. Unlike the German expressionist dramatists, who wrote more or less for a coterie, self-selected audience, Murnau telescopically placed his action, not in the present, but in what Lane Roth calls the "safety of the past" (311), where the more "democratic" or popular audience could, if it chose, ignore the film's current sociopolitical implications. But in the minds of the *cognoscenti* among the same audience, Bremen, Germany, in 1838 would be transposed to the same city in the early 1920s. Thus Hutter's running from Ellen to Nosferatu, and to the promise of financial gain and career advancement, would make sense to such viewers, for Germany's economy was in serious trouble in 1922. Germany as a whole was similarly to run over to Hitler's side around ten years later when, after first feeding on the people's fears in a time of unrest, he artificially stimulated the nation's economy by beginning to build the Nazi war machine.

Yet, even though Nosferatu assaults him and he discovers that the count is a vampire, Hutter does not try to destroy him (as the count was destroyed in the novel by being beheaded and having a stake driven through his heart). When Hutter sees Nosferatu lying asleep in his coffin during the day, he can only draw back in horror—the same

reaction he has when, near the end of the film, Ellen tells him of the vampire's designs on her. Despite the fact, then, that Nosferatu would suck the life out of him and his spouse, just as a tyrant would suck the life out of his people, Hutter can do nothing to oppose him. Just as in the case of his wife, he seems repulsed by yet drawn to an aspect of himself that he perceives in Nosferatu. Hutter hates the bourgeois in himself and he is suspicious of the capitalist democracy that would promote the middle class, but he races back to Ellen from Transylvania. He hates the tyrant in himself and he is suspicious of the "benevolent" dictator who promises to make life better for all the people, yet he does not slay Nosferatu: in effect, he enables the count to make the voyage by ship to Bremen.

It is as if Hutter has deliberately sought out the tyrant Nosferatu, so as to make him aware of Ellen's existence. Nosferatu wants her in the instant Hutter shows him her miniature, and Ellen seems to want him. Yet she appears repulsed by Nosferatu at the same time that she is attracted to him. She allows him to ravish her, to suck her blood, *and* to destroy himself in the process: Ellen intentionally keeps the count by her side until dawn, at which moment the rays of the sun cause him to dissolve into nothingness. Nosferatu is similarly drawn to Ellen at the same time she revolts him, for all the while he is making love to her in his way, by sucking her blood, he is draining her of life. She dies, and the vampire vanishes into thin air.

Nosferatu has taken with him many of the burghers of Bremen, who have died of the plague spread by rats that have made the journey from Transylvania with him. He is repeatedly associated with these rats—they swarm from his earth-filled coffins in the hold of the ship *Demeter*. Indeed, the count himself looks like a rat with his long and pointed, hairy ears, his claws, and his fangs; and he moves like one, especially along the streets of Bremen, where he skulks and sidles in fear of being set upon by the citizens. In the expressionist hero Hutter's mind, the tyrant is both a bloodsucker—a parasite—and a spreader of infectious disease, of a political philosophy that is at once contagious and deadly. Thus Hutter projects Nosferatu as a vampire who looks and moves like a rat and who in effect leads a large pack of rats, his "army" or the extension of his will.

Only Hutter, as the generator of this apocalyptic vision, seems to have knowledge of the presence of Nosferatu in town. Yet he stands passively by as Nosferatu decimates much of the population of Bremen. The tyrant destroys these people, then one of them—Ellen—sacrifices herself to destroy him. Hutter has thus watched the bourgeois in himself cancel out, and be cancelled out by, the autocrat in himself. To their mutual destruction, he has pitted social tyranny—the bourgeoisie in all its conformity and hegemony—against political tyranny—the despot in his isolation and omnipotence. To wit: the expressionist hero Hutter has witnessed the destruction of the two aspects of himself, each of which he both loves and hates: the democratic bourgeois that he is and the “benevolent” dictator that he would be; the will to liberty and equality, and the will to power and suppression.

### **The Bourgeois Expressionist as Last Man**

Hutter, in sum, is the expressionist hero as passive bourgeois, not as active intellectual or artist: as representative of the people, not as their antagonist. He stands, not apart from society, but as a part of it. There is no escape for him into visionary ecstasy, as there might be for the expressionist rebel, or into art, as there was for the expressionist creators themselves. He makes no pronouncements, as did the expressionist theorists, concerning the creation of the “New Man,” nor does he offer a prescriptive aesthetics. He is left at the end to mourn the loss of himself: the Nosferatu who is gone (along with Knock, who expires back in jail the moment he senses that Nosferatu has perished) and the Ellen who is dead. A title declares that there were no more deaths from the plague and that happiness was regained, but the camera does not return to the streets of Bremen. We are left with the overwhelming impression of destruction, of loss. A shot of Hutter mourning over Ellen’s body is followed by the last shot of the film, which appears to emanate from Hutter’s mind or memory: an image of Nosferatu’s now vacant castle jutting defiantly up into the sky.

The title of F. W. Murnau’s next picture, *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Man*, 1924, incorrectly translated as *The Last Laugh* in the United States), could as well be the title of *Nosferatu*. The subsequent work contains expressionistic elements, but they are fused to a realistic base.

We have gone from Hutter's nightmare vision in *Nosferatu* to Emil Jannings' nightmares in *Der letzte Mann*, from the tragic division of one character to the pathetic oneness of another, from the end of the world to a happy ending. Murnau's escape, as expressionist filmmaker, from the potential artistic dead end of *Nosferatu* was to re-create the everyday world in *Der letzte Mann* and put into it a *character* in a dead end, from which he would be rescued by a dream-come-true: the inheritance, from an American, of a large sum of money. For Murnau, then, the antidote to expressionistic nightmare was the opposite extreme: realistic fantasy.

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### **Filmography I: Key Vampire Works**

*Dracula's Death* (1921), directed by Károly Lajthay

*Nosferatu* (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau

*Dracula* (1931), directed by Tod Browning

*Vampyr* (1932), directed by Carl-Theodor Dreyer

*Dracula* (1958), directed by Terence Fisher

*Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1975), directed by Paul Morrissey

*Count Dracula* (1977), directed by Philip Saville

*Nosferatu* (1979), directed by Werner Herzog

*Dracula* (1979), directed by John Badham

*Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), directed by Francis Ford Coppola

*Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), directed by E. Elias Merhige

### **Filmography II: Key Works of German Expressionism**

*The Student of Prague* (1913), directed by Stellan Rye & Paul Wegener

*The Golem* (1920), directed by Paul Wegener & Carl Boese

*From Morn to Midnight* (1920), directed by Karl-Heinz Martin

*Algol* (1920), directed by Hans Werckmeister

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), directed by Robert Wiene

*Genuine* (1920), directed by Robert Wiene

*Destiny* (1921), directed by Fritz Lang

*Nosferatu* (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau  
*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922), directed by Fritz Lang  
*Phantom* (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau  
*Vanina* (1922), directed by Arthur von Gerlach  
*Raskolnikow* (1923), directed by Robert Wiene  
*Warning Shadows* (1923), directed by Arthur Robison  
*Earth Spirit* (1923), directed by Leopold Jessner  
*Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*, 1924), directed by Fritz Lang  
*Waxworks* (1924), directed by Paul Leni & Leo Brinsky  
*Faust* (1926), directed by F. W. Murnau  
*The Student of Prague* (1926), directed by Henrik Galeen  
*Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang  
*Pandora's Box* (1929), directed by G. W. Pabst





*Greed* (1924), Erich von Stroheim, American

# Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*

## ***Greed's Beginnings***

The history of *Greed* (1924) is cruel. Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957) was an Austrian émigré who began his Hollywood career in 1914 as an actor and found a niche during World War I as “The Man You Love to Hate,” playing German officers with shaved head, tight tunic, and monocle. (The publicity called him an ex-officer descended from Austrian nobility. He was, in carefully concealed fact, the son of a Jewish hat manufacturer and had briefly served in the Austrian army; the “von” in his name was self-bestowed.) He began his directing career in 1919 with *Blind Husbands*, in which he also played his suavely diabolical character. More importantly, he showed extraordinary directing talent—scathingly realistic, sexually suggestive, and as cynical as Hollywood could permit. He was quickly recognized as a filmmaker of unique ability with a polished “continental” style: markedly sophisticated, fascinatingly decadent, and wittily risqué.

Stroheim moved on to direct three more comparable films—*The Devil's Passkey* (1920), *Foolish Wives* (1922), and *Merry-Go-Round* (1923)—with, in the 1922 picture, another performance by himself. The stories in his first four films might have been found in any women’s magazine of the day—each featured the lonely wife whose seduction by an attractively wicked Germanic officer and gentleman provided the essential thrill—but they were executed with a sophistication that could not then have been found in any magazine or in any other

Hollywood director. I once showed his third film, *Foolish Wives*, to a group of about twenty poets and artists, asking them in advance not to be put off by the novelettish plot, just to keep their eyes open. Before the film was ten minutes along, they were murmuring, and when it finished, they applauded.

For his fifth film, Stroheim ascended in quality of material. He had long been keen on *McTeague* (1899), by the pioneering American naturalistic novelist Frank Norris, and Stroheim was now empowered to film it. (*Greed* was the second adaptation of *McTeague*, though the first, *Life's Whirlpool* [1916, dir. Barry O'Neil], is now lost.) The Norris novel is a dramatic and sordid but realistic preaching of the evils of greed. Heretofore Stroheim had epitomized the grand scene, as his first three features showed life on an extravagant scale: his characters were all venal, recklessly amoral, decadent; and the films were offered to the public under what, at the time, were lurid titles: *Blind Husbands*, *The Devil's Passkey*, *Foolish Wives*. Stroheim's characters were the rich in an Alpine background, on the boulevards and in the boudoirs of Paris, and in the gambling casinos at Monte Carlo, which was reconstructed on the Universal lot.

*McTeague*, by contrast, took place wholly in California, specifically in San Francisco, Oakland, and the Bay Area, as well as Death Valley, in a very lower-middle-class, even depressed, society. The titular character was a dentist, himself from the lower classes, who practiced his dentistry illegally. Both he and the girl he marries are crass, uneducated vulgarians possessed and destroyed by a love for gold. It seemed unlike anything Stroheim had attempted in his previous films. Yet, though Stroheim had purchased the rights to *McTeague*, he never got the production off the ground until Irving Thalberg, disgusted with the director's method of extravagant production on *Merry-Go-Round*, quarreled with him, and Stroheim—otherwise Universal's most prestigious director/producer—was dismissed. It did not take long, however, for a man of Stroheim's artistic standing to sign with Goldwyn studios, where it was soon announced that his first production would be a film adaptation of *McTeague*.

The title of the picture, as we know, became *Greed*. And by this time, Stroheim had proceeded to push much further his well-earned

reputation for extravagance. Deliberately doing a turnabout, Stroheim saw it as a venture completely shot in its natural setting, the Bay Area, as far away as he could get from the studios of Hollywood. The company would even go to Death Valley to film the bitterly ironic finale of the story. The director saw the project as a faithful adaptation of the Norris novel, an almost page-by-page re-creation of a well-known American fiction of the naturalist type. The film grew to monstrous proportions, eventually reaching an estimated forty-two reels of from seven to nine hours. (Accounts vary.) The studio forced Stroheim to severely edit it, with the help of his good friend, Rex Ingram and of his co-scenarist, June Mathis. It remained, however, a hopelessly gargantuan project, so much so that characters had to be eliminated so that the main story of McTeague, Trina, and Schouler became entirely the story of *Greed*.

We can sum all this up by saying that Stroheim began shooting in March of 1923, and in January 1924 he showed, to a selected group of twelve people (including Harry Carr, Rex Ingram, Aileen Pringle, Carmel Myers, Idwal Jones, Joseph Jackson, Jack Jungmeyer, Fritz Tidden, Welford Beaton, Valentine Mandelstam, and Jean Bertin [Weinberg, 13]), the forty-two-reel, first cut of the film. The film was never again shown at that length. What happened to *Greed* thereafter—Stroheim's arguments with the producers, the various versions—is too intricate to summarize. Result: the version that was released in December 1924, which has been the usual version until now, runs 135 minutes. The excised footage disappeared, though rumors of its whereabouts persisted. For the rest of his life, Stroheim mourned over what he called “the skeleton of my dead child” (Koszarski, 1994: 234).

Ironically, it was Irving Thalberg who ordered the drastic cuts in *Greed*. Thalberg had moved from his berth with Carl Laemmle at Universal to join the new Metro-Goldwyn. He was soon to become head of production at the amalgamated Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, where, after Louis B. Mayer officially became head of production, Thalberg had his own unit. His first concern was to shape *Greed* out of the mountainous reels of footage that Stroheim had so recklessly shot. The unused film was ordered melted down so that the silver in the negative could be salvaged; there would be no ultimate rediscovery

of footage unused and fitted into subsequent re-issues of the picture. This would be another chapter in the obliteration of Stroheim's name as a great director, for not one film he made exists as he originally envisioned it. All have been cut either maliciously or out of necessity. Only one may have escaped obliteration—Universal's *The Devil's Passkey*, but it is a lost picture; to date, no print whatsoever has survived.

### **Greed: Adapted, Edited, and Restored**

Stroheim would be somewhat happier over the fate of *Greed*, though not content. In 1999 Rick Schmidlin and colleagues "restored" 115 minutes, to make a film of four hours and ten minutes (first issued on videotape by Warner Brothers early in 2000). I put that key word in quotation marks because the restoration consists of many stills from the lost footage, here arranged and intertitled according to Stroheim's recently discovered continuity script. (Those intertitles occasionally bow to Milton and Shakespeare.) Schmidlin, who also did the restored version of Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), made the masterly most of the available materials, and Robert Israel wrote a score that, appropriately, savors of theater music of the silent era. The result is in some ways astonishing, in all ways invaluable, and ultimately, because of the loss it now underlines, saddening.

Norris's novel was clearly spawned by Balzac and Zola. Stroheim's adaptation, done with June Mathis, begins in a California gold camp in 1908 where the young McTeague, a tousle-headed giant, is a miner. Early on, we see his tenderness, as he rescues an injured bird, then his temper and his strength as he throws a man over a cliff for harming the bird. To protect and further him, his mother apprentices him to an itinerant dentist, and after a few years McTeague opens his own office in San Francisco. He meets and eventually marries a German-American girl named Trina, thus bilking the hopes of another suitor named Marcus Schouler. (Memorable moments in this process are the wooing of Trina under sedation in a dental chair and the miserably unromantic, even comic, wedding of McTeague and his bride.)

Trina becomes obsessive about money, heated by the very acquisition of money—\$5,000, which comes from her winning a lottery. She keeps the winnings to herself and dreams about gold. Schouler

then avenges himself on McTeague by exposing him as an unlicensed practitioner. McTeague is ruined. In time, destitute, maddened by his wife's miserliness, McTeague murders the now crazed Trina, after which he flees back to the gold fields. There he teams up with a prospector named Cribbens and they find a large quantity of valuable quartz—with which they plan to become millionaires. Schouler joins a posse in search of the murderer. The last sequence, one of the most famous in world film history, shows the two men meeting and fighting in the middle of Death Valley.

The finish is an antecedent of the bleak violence and bitter endings of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and later of *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *Meek's Cutoff* (2010): before Schouler dies, he handcuffs himself to McTeague, and the picture fades out on McTeague sitting in the murderous heat of Death Valley handcuffed to a man he slew. There is something fundamentally profound, however, in Mac's releasing a canary as he resigns himself to death in the desert. The bird now serves to demonstrate that in death our anti-hero will be free of his own cruelty and selfishness. This moment also serves to bookend the film by mirroring the opening scene in which Mac gently rescued the injured bird, reminding us of his ever-present humanity. Stroheim thus seems to some extent to reject some cynicism here, pulling away from a nihilistic conclusion where death could otherwise function as merely the last in a string of meaningless tragedies.

Stroheim's original edit of *Greed* contained two subplots that were later cut. The point of these subplots was to contrast two possible outcomes of Trina and McTeague's life together. The first depicted the lives of the junkman Zerkow and Maria Miranda Macapa, the young Mexican woman who collects junk for Zerkow and sold Trina the lottery ticket. Maria often talks about her imaginary, solid gold dining set with Zerkow, who becomes obsessed by it. Eventually, believing she has riches hidden away, Zerkow marries her. He often asks about the dining set, but she gives a different answer each time he mentions it. Zerkow does not believe her and becomes obsessed with getting to the truth. He murders Maria and, after having lost his mind, leaps into San Francisco Bay.

The second subplot depicts the lives of Charles W. Grannis and Miss Anastasia Baker. Grannis and Baker are two elderly boarders who

share adjoining rooms in the apartment complex where Trina and McTeague live. Throughout their time at the apartment complex, they have not met. But they both sit close to their adjoining wall and listen to the other for company, so they know almost everything about each other. They finally meet and cannot hide their mutual, long-time feelings. When they reveal their love, Grannis admits he has \$5,000, making him just as rich as Trina. This makes little difference to them, however. Eventually they marry, and a door connects their rooms.

Stroheim's target in the main plot of film—the films as it exists—is never entirely stable, though the titular greed has often been ascribed to Trina. *Variety Weekly*'s original review, for example, focused on the moral of the film as imploring wives not to be “miserly, greedy, or money-crazed, and with it consequently intolerant of a husband’s welfare” (Rosenbaum, 49). In fairness to Trina, the film hardly supports a reading so focused on one character’s motives. How can we ignore Marcus, who does not hesitate to sell out his friend over money? Similarly, McTeague’s behavior is quite probably the most revolting of anyone on screen. After nearly forcing himself on an unconscious Trina in his dentist’s chair, he then spends much of their marriage abusing her—in one particularly disturbing scene, biting her fingers as punishment for keeping her winnings from him. This peculiarly gruesome assault continues the theme of abjection introduced during McTeague and Trina’s wedding party. Even before the film’s conflicts begin to emerge, the basic human nature that so fascinated Stroheim appears through the gluttony of the guests (among them a midget, a hunchback, a woman with buck teeth, and a boy on crutches), grotesquely stuffing their mouths and making a mess. Bodily needs and limitations become the only laws that truly govern, echoed in McTeague’s own cruelty.

## Cinema and Sentiment, or Naturalism and Performance

All the performances in the main plot—in the *Greedy* that we have—are presentational, without great depth or finesse. Zasu Pitts, as Trina, has the only character to go through some sort of development. Gibson Gowland as McTeague, Jean Hersholt as Schouler, and Chester Conklin as Trina’s father all present their characters almost as pageant

figures, embodying this or that temperament, of which they produce more as needed. (Curiously, three of these actors had quite different careers, before and after—Pitts as a fluttery comedienne, Hersholt as a kindly soul, Conklin as a Keystone buffoon.) But it could be argued that Stroheim saw these characters not as individuated personae, but as factors in a huge ruthless machine, integers of fate grinding to and being ground by inevitability.

This view is supported by the difference between the acting and, so far as it can be separated, the directing, which is generally much more comprehending and subtle. It's as if Stroheim attempted to match Norris with what he did as director, and as if he viewed his cast not as artists in themselves, but as mobile components of his design. Some of his touches are too heavy to be called touches. McTeague and Trina are in a lonely railway station, and he kisses her passionately for the first time just as a locomotive, hissing steam, pulses by. A mousetrap in her mother's hands snaps shut as Trina's marriage is arranged. But such moments seem excesses of a fatalistic drive, a rampant naturalism. Indeed, Stroheim considered *Greed* to be a Greek tragedy in which environment and heredity controlled the characters' fates and reduced them to human beasts.

As the director himself put it, “What I don’t like is the persistent denial by blubbering sentimentalists of man’s basic nature. Away with those who would sterilize life, or, as they call it, ‘spiritualize’ life” (Curtiss, 175). This sentiment is echoed by Frank Norris in his essay “The True Reward of the Novelist” (1901), an excerpt from which appears in a title card at the start of *Greed*: “I never truckled, I never took off the hat to fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth. They liked it or they didn’t like it. What had that to do with me? I told them the truth; I knew it for the truth then and I know it for the truth now” (Lennig, 2000: 187-188). Stroheim expanded upon Norris’s and his own line of thought in the following:

I intended [in *Greed*] to show men and women as they are all over the world, none of them perfect, with their good and bad qualities, their noble and idealistic sides and their jealous, vicious, mean, and greedy sides. I was not going to compromise.

I felt that after the last war, the motion-picture-going public had tired of the cinematographic “chocolate éclairs” which had been stuffed down their throats and which had in a large degree figuratively ruined their stomachs with this overdose of Saccharose in pictures. Now, I felt, they were ready for a large bowl of plebeian but honest corned beef and cabbage. (Finler, 1972: 7)

In *Greed*, Stroheim certainly succeeds at rejecting a sanitized vision of human nature. What little sympathy we feel for his characters is largely grounded and overwritten by a combination of pity and revulsion. But the director does not simply forsake his subjects. He naturalistically brings us to their level, offers us entry into their lives, and, somehow, finds a recognizable humanity amid the horrors of their actions. It is no surprise that such directors as Luchino Visconti, Orson Welles, and Billy Wilder, and such critics as André Bazin, Lotte Eisner, and Gavin Lambert, named *Greed* among their ten favorite films (Rosenbaum, 44, 50), or that many other artists would go on to borrow much from Stroheim’s authorial style. More recently, in *Sight and Sound*’s 2012 poll of the ten greatest films ever made, Guillermo del Toro called *Greed* “a perfect reflection of the anxiety permeating the passage into the twentieth century and the absolute dehumanization that was to come.”

In accordance with his naturalism, Stroheim was one of the first directors to insist on location shooting as needed—the streets of San Francisco, the blazing platter of Death Valley for the last sequence. (Stroheim’s shots filming the sun in Death Valley predated Kurosawa’s better-known uses of this unconventional technique in *Rashomon* [1950].) All the compositions articulate space with originality and daring, through such sophisticated filming techniques as montage editing and deep-focus cinematography. An instance of the latter: McTeague on the stairs, large in the foreground, with Trina in clear focus above him on the landing. (Did Welles know of this shot when Charles Foster Kane shouts down the stairs after the departing Jim Gettys?) Or: McTeague and Schouler fighting over a card table in the narrow corner of a saloon. (Did Fritz Lang know of this shot when a fight erupts in

a corner of a beer hall in *M* [1931]? The answer to this, and to the Welles question, is probably “no”; *Greed* simply anteceded them.)

The supporting and incidental actors in *Greed* themselves were selected with an eye for something like what Eisenstein called typage, the face that instantly characterizes the person sufficiently for the story’s purposes. Furthermore, with the cinematographers Ben Reynolds and William H. Daniels, both of whom had illustrious subsequent careers, Stroheim mixed carefully the harsh light of revelation and the clere-story light that softens so much of nineteenth-century photography. The contrast seems to imply a difference between life as it is and life as we wish it. Stroheim even dabs in contemporary markers, like the tiny American flags in the hats of Trina’s immigrant family on Washington’s birthday; makes sure that the setting of the story is in the story, like the streetcars running past windows during intimate scenes; and ventures into Zolaesque sex. After Trina withdraws her \$5,000 from the bank in gold coins, for example, she spreads them on her bed, then undresses and rolls on them. (Throughout this black-and-white film, Schmidlin had the gold tinted, as Stroheim wished—and did himself in some scenes, hand-coloring individual frames with stencils.)

## Reception and Revenue

*Greed* premiered on December 4, 1924, at the Cosmopolitan Theatre in Columbus Circle, New York City. MGM did very little advertising (Finler, 1972: 29), and *Greed* received mostly negative reviews. *Variety Weekly* called it “an out-and-out box office flop” only six days after its premiere (Finler, 1972: 31). The review went on to say that “nothing more morbid and senseless, from a commercial-picture standpoint, has been seen on the screen for a long, long time” and that, despite its “excellent acting, fine direction, and the undoubted power of its story . . . it does not entertain” (Lennig, 2000: 218). In the February 1925 issue of *Theatre Magazine*, Aileen St. John-Brenon wrote that “the persons in the screenplay are not characters, but types—they are well selected, weighed, and completely drilled. But they did not act; they do not come to life. They perform their mission like so many uncouth images of miserliness and repugnant animalism” (Lennig, 2000: 218). Iris Barry of the Museum of Modern Art, for her part, disliked

the tinting, saying “a not very pleasing yellow tinge is smudged in” (Koszarski, 1983: 147). A March 1925 review in *Pictureplay* magazine even went so far as to posit that “perhaps an American director would not have seen greed as a vice” (Rosenbaum, 1993: 36).

In its December 1924-January 1925 issue, *Exceptional Photoplays*, by contrast, called *Greed* “one of the most uncompromising films ever shown on the screen. There have already been many criticisms of its brutality, its stark realism, its sordidness. But the point is that it was never intended to be a pleasant picture” (Finler, 1972: 32). The review in *Exceptional Photoplays* went on to declare that “Mr. von Stroheim has always been the realist as Rex Ingram is the romanticist and Griffith the sentimentalist of the screen, and in *Greed* he has given us an example of realism at its starker. Like the novel from which the plot was taken, *Greed* is a terrible and wonderful thing” (Vieira, 48). Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* himself gave the film a mostly positive review in regard to the acting and directing while criticizing how it was edited, writing that MGM “clipped this production as much as they dared . . . and are to be congratulated on their efforts and the only pity is that they did not use the scissors more generously in the beginning” (*NYT*, Dec. 5, 1924).

In a *Life Magazine* article, the dramatist and screenwriter Robert E. Sherwood also defended MGM’s cutting of the film and called Stroheim “a genius . . . badly in need of a stopwatch” (Koszarski, 1983: 147). A favorable review additionally came from Richard Watts, Jr., of the *New York Herald Tribune*, who called *Greed* “the most important picture yet produced in America . . . It is the one picture of the season that can hold its own as a work of dramatic art worthy of comparison with such stage plays as *What Price Glory?* [1924] and *Desire Under the Elms* [1924]” (Koszarski, 1983: 147). The April 20, 1925 edition of the *Montreal Gazette* itself described *Greed* as “one of the few pictures worthy of serious consideration . . . which offer a real and convincing study of life and character and that secure their ends by artistic and intellectual means rather than by writing down to the level of the groundlings.” The review went on to describe the direction as “masterly,” citing “its remarkable delineation of character development and the subtle touches which convey ideas through vision rather than the written word, an all-too-rare

employment of the possibilities of the photoplay as a distinct branch of art capable of truthful and convincing revelation and interpretation of life's realities" (*MG*, April 20, 1925).

*Greed*, alas, made no profit either domestic or foreign. Stroheim's biographer Arthur Lennig stated that according to MGM's records, the final cost of *Greed* was \$546,883 (Lennig, 2000: 217)—a fortune in the mid-1920s. Another biographer, Richard Koszarski, stated that the film's final cost was actually \$725,601: \$585,250 for the production, \$30,000 for Stroheim's personal fee, \$54,971 for processing and editing, \$53,654 for advertising, and \$1,726 for motion-picture-association dues. Yet *Greed* showed a gross of only \$224,500 domestically, and the foreign receipts were even more disappointing: \$3,063 in Canada and \$47,264 in other markets (Koszarski, 1983: 173). In total, then, it earned \$274,827. The world's moviegoing public simply resisted *Greed*. Stroheim and his few faithful cohorts could quite honestly say that the picture as he filmed it was never released. The studio also alibied that *Greed* never stood a chance of success as a product from a studio noted for creating stars. There were no box-office names in *Greed*; the cast was hand-chosen by Stroheim himself, and none of them had ever brought in a dime on their own. As previously noted, they were more often featured in comedies, as were fellow cast members Dale Fuller and Hughie Mack—and *Greed* was certainly no comedy.

## ***Greed's Aftermath***

In sum, it would be exaggerating to call *Greed* a deeply moving experience in character and story: the very success of Stroheim's schema seems to preclude that. The film's consistent fascination is in its marvelous texture—and in its almost anachronistic seriousness of intent. Yet it is no mere historical specimen. It is a vital achievement in a new art that helped to open possibilities in that new art. Stroheim went on to direct only four more pictures: *The Merry Widow* (1925, adapted from the operetta); *The Wedding March* (1928, in two parts, and again severely cut); *Queen Kelly* (1929, directed for Gloria Swanson, but never completed by Stroheim—in another aborting of an exceptional work—though released by Swanson with her own additions); and the

sound film *Hello, Sister!* (a.k.a. *Walking Down Broadway* [1933], never released in Stroheim's original version).

Erich von Stroheim continued as a successful actor. Today he is best known generally for his Rauffenstein in Jean Renoir's *La Grande illusion* (*Grand Illusion*, 1937), where his caricatured Hun of First World War films is transmuted into a full-bodied summary of an age, as well as for his Max von Mayerling in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)—where Stroheim played an ex-Hollywood silent film director now working as the butler for his ex-wife and ex-silent film star Norma Desmond, played by Gloria Swanson. (Excerpts from *Queen Kelly*, with Swanson, were used in the film, and the Mayerling character even states that he used to be one of the three great directors of the silent era, along with D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille.) But the directing career this man might have had, the work he might have given us, is only one more sharp poignancy in the “what if” history of the arts.

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## Filmography: Key Works about Money & Greed

*Greed* (1924), directed by Erich von Stroheim

*The Gold Rush* (1925), directed by Charles Chaplin

*Executive Suite* (1954), directed by Robert Wise

*L'Argent (Money*, 1983), directed by Robert Bresson

*Wall Street* (1987), directed by Oliver Stone

*Other People's Money* (1991), directed by Norman Jewison

*Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), directed by James Foley

*Casino* (1995), directed by Martin Scorsese

*A Simple Plan* (1998), directed by Sam Raimi

*Boiler Room* (2000), directed by Ben Younger

*There Will Be Blood* (2007), directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

*Mad Money* (2008), directed by Callie Khouri

*The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), directed by Martin Scorsese

*Money Monster* (2016), directed by Jodie Foster

*All the Money in the World* (2017), directed by Ridley Scott



*L'Âge d'or* (1930), Luis Buñuel, French

# Luis Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or*

## The Career of Luis Buñuel

For all the critical attention (and furious critical controversy) his work occasioned over half a century, Luis Buñuel resisted our best taxonomical efforts. To begin with, while no artist of the twentieth century strikes one as more quintessentially Spanish than Buñuel, how can one apply the term “Spanish filmmaker” to a man whose *oeuvre* is far more nearly identified with France and Mexico than with the land of his birth? By the same token, can one speak of any film as “typical” of the man who made both *L'Âge d'or* (*The Golden Age*, 1930) and *Nazarín* (1959), both *Los olvidados* (*The Forgotten*, 1950) and *Belle de jour* (*Beauty of the Day*, 1967), both *Land without Bread* (1933) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)? Nonetheless, from *Un Chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1928) to *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), a Buñuel film is always (albeit, as in many of the Mexican pieces of the 1940s and 1950s, only sporadically) a Buñuel film.

Perhaps the easiest way to deal with Buñuel's career is to suggest that certain avatars of Luis Buñuel may be identified at different (if sometimes slightly overlapping) historical periods. The first Luis Buñuel (and the one under consideration here) is the surrealist: the man who slit eyeballs (*Un Chien andalou*); the man to whom blasphemy was less a matter of specific utterances and gestures than a controlling style out of which might emerge new modes of feeling and expression (*L'Âge d'or*); the man who documentarized the unimaginable (*Land without*

*Bread*); and finally, the man who demonstrated more clearly than any other that surrealist perspectives demanded cinematographic realism.

The second Luis Buñuel (the saddest, and much the least identifiable, now as then) is the all-but-anonymous journeyman film professional: the collaborator, often unbilled and almost always unremarked, on Spanish films that to this day remain unknown to any but the most dogged researchers; the archivist and adaptor and functionary in New York and Hollywood; the long-term absentee from the world's attention. The third Buñuel is the Mexican director, the man who achieved a few works that at the time attracted varying degrees of notice outside the sphere of Latin American commercial distribution (*Los olvidados*, *Él* [*This Strange Passion*, 1953], *Robinson Crusoe* [1954], *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* [1955]), but who also made other works that at the time attracted no notice at all.

The fourth is the Luis Buñuel who gradually made his way back to Europe by way of a few French films made in alternation with films in Mexico; who then, with *Viridiana* (1961), returned to appall, and so to reclaim, his native land; and who thenceforth, no matter where or under what conditions he operated, persuasively reasserted himself as a figure of unmistakable moment in world cinema. This last Luis Buñuel, following his re-emergence in the early-to-mid-1960s, was the past master, at once awesome and beloved, as serene in his command of his medium as he was cheerfully intrepid in his pursuit of whatever of value might be mined from the depths of the previously unexplored.

Each of the Buñuels of the preceding catalogue, except for the obscure and essentially uncreative second one, is manifest, or at least implicit, in the others. Even in his Mexican work, which included some otherwise less than exalted assignments (and Buñuel himself, unlike certain of his more indiscriminate adulators, was perfectly willing to acknowledge that much of his Mexican work was shoddy or aborted or simply dull), the scion of surrealism showed his hand. I'm thinking of several astonishing dream sequences: the vision of slabs of raw meat hanging from the racks of a Mexico City streetcar (*Illusion Travels by Streetcar* [1954]), the incongruous verticality of the skeletal skyscrapers rising from the Mexico City slums (*Los olvidados*), and the necrophiliac ragings at the end of the Buñuel version of *Wuthering Heights* (*Abis-*

*mos de passion*, 1954). At the same time, it was in his Mexican studio movies, with their often absurdly brief shooting schedules, that Buñuel developed the unobtrusive but sovereign sway over narrative continuity and visual construction that so exhilarates admirers of such later works as *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964) or *That Obscure Object of Desire*. (So much so that, according to Francisco Aranda, Alfred Hitchcock in 1972 called Buñuel “the best director in the world” [248].)

Similarly, one may recognize in *Tristana* (1970) that same merciless anatomy of a specific social milieu found in earlier Buñuel, and in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) that same theme of inexplicable entrapment which one first encountered in *Land without Bread*. In *The River and Death* (1955) a man, his head imprisoned in an iron lung, submits to a round of face-slapping. We recognize in the image (and in the gasp of laughter it provokes) something of the merciless attack on our pieties of Buñuel’s early surrealist works and something of the more offhand, wicked humor of, say, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. When such a recognition is reached, we know that the variety of styles and accents in which Buñuel addressed us over the years is almost irrelevant. The political and social (or anti-social) canons of early surrealism could not contain him, nor could the foolish melodramatic conventions of some of his Mexican films stifle his humor, nor could the elegant actors and luxurious color cinematography of some of the later French films finally seduce him. Against all odds, his vision sufficed to transcend any and all stylistic diversions.

“Visionary,” perhaps the most exhausted word in the critical vocabulary, struggles back to life when applied to Buñuel and his anti-bourgeois, anti-Catholic camera. In the consistent clarity of its perception, in its refusal to distinguish between something called “reality” and something called “hallucination,” in its desire to retain narrative while simultaneously calling into question the illusionist tyranny of narrative, Buñuel’s camera always acts in the service of a fundamental surrealist principle—one of the few principles of any kind that Buñuel was never tempted to call into question. Whether focused on the tragic, earthly destiny of an inept would-be saint (*Nazarín*) or on the bizarre obsessions of an inept, would-be sinner (the uncle in *Viridiana*, among a good many others), whether portraying an old man who is a

shoe fetishist (*The Diary of a Chambermaid*) or a respectable bourgeois wife who works as a sadomasochistic prostitute in the afternoons (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*), Buñuel's camera is the instrument of the most rigorous denotation, invoking nothing beyond that which it so plainly and patiently registers. The uncertainties and ambivalences we may feel as we watch a Buñuel film arise not from the camera's capacity to mediate but from the camera's capacity to record: our responses are inherent in the subjects Buñuel selects, in those extremes of human experiences that we recognize as his special domain.

## Buñuel Strikes Gold

Luis Buñuel made his first film with Salvador Dalí: the twenty-four-minute silent surrealist work called *Un Chien andalou*. (Buñuel had met Dalí at the University of Madrid in the early 1920s, and he began working in the cinema with Fritz Lang and Jean Epstein.) Subsequently, Buñuel was offered financing by the Viscount Charles de Noailles for another film, and two years later he made another surrealist film, this time with sound, called *L'Âge d'or*. (Dalí worked on it for only a few days; his credit as co-scenarist amounted to only a few suggestions.) Ironically for Buñuel, when *L'Âge d'or* was first shown it attracted the interest of a European agent for the Hollywood studio MGM. He signed Buñuel to a six-month contract at \$250 a week for what was then Hollywood's most powerful studio. Buñuel left for the United States in December 1930, just as the furor surrounding *L'Âge d'or* was about to begin.

The film was originally to have been called "The Icy Water of Egotistical Calculation"—an expression from the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx, 37). Moreover, a manifesto included in the program of *L'Âge d'or*, written and illustrated by a number of surrealists, contained the following statement:

The foundations are laid, conventions become dogma, policemen push people around just as they do in everyday life. And, just as in everyday life, accidents occur in bourgeois society while that society pays no attention whatsoever. But such accidents (and it must be noted that in Buñuel's film they remain uncorrupted by plausibility) further weaken an already rotting

society that is trying to prolong its existence artificially through priests and policemen . . . But it is LOVE that brings about the transition from pessimism to action; Love, denounced in the bourgeois demonology as the root of all evil. For Love demands the sacrifice of every other value: status, family, and honor. (Hammond, 2000: 189)

Late in 1930 *L'Âge d'or* opened to the public at Studio 28 in Paris. (Studio 28 had been founded two years earlier and was exclusively devoted to the screening of avant-garde films.) At the premiere two right-wing vigilante groups, the Patriots' League and the Anti-Jewish League, stormed Studio 28, hurling purple ink and rotten eggs at the screen, setting off tear gas and stink bombs, and clubbing members of the audience with cries of "Death to the Jews"; furnishings were destroyed and paintings (by Dalí, Max Ernst, and Man Ray) in the surrealist exhibit that had been set up in the foyer were slashed. Later the police instructed the theater's director to cut two scenes, and the conservative press initiated a campaign to have this "pornographic" film banned completely. Richard-Pierre Bodin of *Le Figaro* decried *L'Âge d'or* as "an exercise in Bolshevism" (Jones, 377). By mid-December the film had been banned and all copies confiscated; it caused such an immense scandal that in 1934 the Viscount and his wife withdrew it from commercial circulation.

As Buñuel himself described the scene at the movie theater: "The extreme right attacked the movie theater . . . and destroyed seats. It was the "scandal" of *L'Âge d'or*. A week later, Chiappe . . . purely and simply banned the film in the name of public order" (Instituto Cervantes, 69). The director would later have his revenge on Jean Chiappe, who was prefect of police for Paris, using his name in *The Diary of a Chambermaid* to represent reactionary forces. At the time, Buñuel, and *L'Âge d'or*, were accused of everything detestable: "Judeo-Bolshevik devil-worshipping Masonic wogs did this," went the moral panic (Hammond, 1997: 61). While Buñuel and Noailles were naturally distressed at the reaction, the surrealists themselves made the most of the scandal, publishing a tract that included a provocative questionnaire by Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard alongside photos of the wrecked cinema.

For the next fifty years the picture was a tantalizing memory for only a few. Celebrators like the noted film historian Georges Sadoul, present at the premier, declared that *L'Âge d'or* was a “masterpiece in its violence, its purity, its lyric frenzy, its absolute sincerity” (Pendergast, 16). Then in 1979 Allen Thiher wrote the following in his book *The Cinematic Muse*: “*Un Chien andalou* is undoubtedly the best unknown work of surrealist cinema, and it will probably remain so until the family of Viscount Charles de Noailles decides that his soul will not roast in hell if *L'Âge d'or* . . . is ever released again” (24). Evidently the family made this eschatological decision: *L'Âge d'or* was re-released and had its U.S. theatrical premiere at the Public Theater in New York in the spring of 1980, in Paris a year later. This re-release was welcome, for *L'Âge d'or* represents a key moment in surrealist filmmaking, indeed in the history of the experimental cinema. It is also important because it formally initiated the long and distinguished career of Luis Buñuel, its director. Both these strands are inexorably intertwined in any history of European filmmaking.

That said, not many fifty-year-old scandals remain scandalous. *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913) and *Ulysses* (1922) live by something more than the uproar they created when they were born. So must *L'Âge d'or*. I happened to see it in the 1960s at New York's Museum of Modern Art, so I was braced for non-shock when I saw it in 1980, fifty years after its premiere, and then again recently. Thiher says in his thoughtful book (consisting of critical essays on French film) that “the goal of all surrealist activity” was “to abolish the distinction between the objective and the subjective, between the repressive working of the reality principle and the pleasure principle” (28). The distinction has been so steadily disregarded, if not worn away, during the last ninety years or so that the shocking disjunctions of surrealism are now generally transformed into comedy. In *L'Âge d'or*, when the man at a formal party slaps the face of the woman who accidentally spills wine on him, it doesn't seem much more socially anarchic than what Groucho Marx did so often to Margaret Dumont in such movies as *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Duck Soup* (1933), and *A Night at the Opera* (1935). An even greater tamer of the “offenses” of *L'Âge d'or* is Buñuel himself, whose later works contain a lot of this film's elements refurbished, even amplified.

## **L'Âge d'or, Revealed**

The plot of *L'Âge d'or* is remarkably simple: two lovers (Gaston Modot and Lya Lys) declare war on a bourgeois French society intent on thwarting the fulfillment of their desires. (The film did not lack for name talent: for example, the lead, Modot, was a longtime French film star who started with Gaumont in 1909 and worked for a number of the great directors of the French cinema: Louis Delluc in *Fièvre* [Fever, 1921], René Clair in *Under the Roofs of Paris* [1930], Marcel Carné in *Les Enfants du paradis* [Children of Paradise, 1945], and Jean Renoir in *La Règle du jeu* [The Rules of the Game, 1939] as well as *La Grande illusion* [Grand Illusion, 1937]. Modot in fact began as a painter, was a friend of Picasso, and had his portrait painted by Modigliani in 1918.) *L'Âge d'or* features moment after moment of surrealist juxtapositions, as the proud dowager is slapped, a poor beggar is savagely beaten, and a gamekeeper shoots his son. The themes of the film follow the concerns of *Un Chien andalou*: frustrated love, society's repression of sexuality, the constancy of physical violence, attacks on the clergy (some of whom wind up as skeletons on some rocks near the seashore). The three main assaults of the picture, then, are on conventional love (as opposed to *l'amour fou*), traditional piety, and social order.

But *L'Âge d'or*, a longer work, is far more complex. Although the actions of the frustrated lovers are central, the film goes off in all sorts of directions. Indeed, it opens with documentary footage of scorpions. This leads into incidents on a rocky seashore, where a gang of bandits (led by the Dada/surrealist painter Ernst) is invaded first by a group of chanting bishops and then by dignitaries who "have come to found the Roman Empire." The film ends with a sequence showing a cross in the snow and covered tresses blowing in the wind, to the tune of a *paso doble* (music that accompanies the dance emulating the movements of a bullfight). Indeed, where *Un Chien andalou* plays with vision through eye-line mismatches and an emphasis on looking and the exchange of glances, *L'Âge d'or* is concerned with the *ear*. In some sense, *Un Chien andalou* is about editing—the splice "in a blink of the eye"—while *L'Âge d'or* explores the filmic possibilities of sound.

As for the possibilities of sight in the film, Buñuel said in 1955: "Dalí and I would select gags and objects that would happen to come

to mind. And we rejected without mercy everything that might mean something" (Zants, 26). "Mean" means, of course, some meaning in objective reality. I'll try now to list the episodes—which is what they are, not story—of the sixty-minute *L'Âge d'or*: the quasi-scientific documentary about scorpions; the gang of bandits, starved and wretched, who eventually collapse exhausted on some cliffs; the mock founding of the city of Rome by the sea, which is interrupted by the sound of two lovers grappling lustfully in the mud; two policemen seen dragging Modot down the street; Modot observed fantasizing about Lys as he looks at a photograph; Modot as he frees himself from his captors by producing an official-looking document and, before leaving in a taxi, kicks a blind man; a grand reception in a marquis's magnificent villa near Rome, which is interrupted by a horse-drawn cart proceeding through the drawing room, as well as a fire—strange incidents that the guests nonetheless ignore; the gamekeeper pictured as he hugs his small son, then shoots the boy for jostling a cigarette he was rolling; a young woman discovered as she discovers a cow sitting on her bed.

Modot arrives, carrying a woman's dress, slaps the face of the marquise, then takes Lys into the garden, where they embrace passionately while an orchestra nearby plays a bit of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), with a priest in the musical group. The couple's lovemaking is frustrated when Modot is summoned away; meanwhile, the frustrated woman sucks the toe of a statue. Modot gets a phone call from an angry Minister of the Interior, who says (over newsreel shots of fire and crowds fleeing), "You are the only one to blame for what has happened, murderer," and then kills himself. Modot returns to his lover but she leaves him to make love with the old conductor of that orchestra that is giving a concert in the garden. (Some accounts call the conductor her father.) We see the despair of Modot in his lover's bedroom as he throws various objects out the window—a pine tree on fire, a live archbishop, a stuffed giraffe, feathers. In the finale, four survivors of the "most brutal of orgies" leave the chateau led by the Duke of Blangis (the criminal-hero of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* [1785]), dressed and bearded like Jesus. (The fact that Pasolini made a modernized, explicit film of the Sade novel, called *Salò* [1975], is part of the cultural difference between 1930 and subsequent decades.)

## Surrealism and Shock

No one who has seen “Saturday Night Live” (1975-present) or “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” (1969-74) is going to be greatly upset by *L’Âge d’or*, which is just another way of saying that those television programs are descendants of the surrealist movement in which Buñuel was active. But both in shock effect and intrinsically, I think this second film lesser in the end than *Un Chien andalou*. One can see a daring, truly cinematic imagination in *L’Âge d’or*, but it is crudely photographed and acted, except for Lya Lys as the female lover. Buñuel’s cruelty, his scatology, his linkages of sex and religion, of sex and death, have all become so familiar since 1930, have been used so much more diabolically, that this film is less a regained masterpiece than a regained sketchbook, more a precedent for Buñuel’s later work than a work attacking the core values of Western civilization. Just think of *The Milky Way* (1969) and, quite apart from gains in technique, you see how Buñuel made the conflict of the pleasure principle and the reality principle into a tense symbiosis rather than the mere juxtaposition of *L’Âge d’or*.

The real shockers of 1930 these days are the films in which the reality of that period is *not* fractured, films that totally accept valentine-card love, *Saturday Evening Post* family life, hip-hoorah patriotism, and the platitudes of the business world as evidence of divine order. Talk about surrealism!

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## Filmography: Key Works of Cinematic Surrealism

*Entr'acte (Intermission, 1924)*, directed by René Clair  
*The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), directed by Germaine Dulac  
*L'Étoile de mer (The Starfish, 1928)*, directed by Man Ray  
*Un Chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog, 1928)*, directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Les Mystères du Château de Dé (The Mysteries of the Chateau of Dice, 1929)*, directed by Man Ray  
*L'Âge d'or (The Golden Age, 1930)*, directed by Luis Buñuel  
*The Blood of a Poet* (1932), directed by Jean Cocteau  
*Rose Hobart* (1936), directed by Joseph Cornell  
*Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), directed by Maya Deren  
*At Land* (1946), directed by Maya Deren  
*Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), directed by Hans Richter  
*Beauty and the Beast* (1946), directed by Jean Cocteau  
*A Song of Love* (1950), directed by Jean Genet  
*Orpheus* (1950), directed by Jean Cocteau  
*Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), directed by Alain Resnais  
*La Jetée (The Pier, 1962)*, directed by Chris Marker  
*The Exterminating Angel* (1962), directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Scorpio Rising* (1963), directed by Kenneth Anger  
*The Color of Pomegranates* (1969), directed by Sergei Parajanov  
*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), directed by Dušan Makavejev  
*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Solaris* (1972), directed by Andrei Tarkovsky  
*The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), directed by Luis Buñuel  
*That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Stalker* (1979), directed by Andrei Tarkovsky  
*Alice* (1988), directed by Jan Svankmajer  
*Naked Lunch* (1991), directed by David Cronenberg  
*The City of Lost Children* (1995), directed by Marc Caro & Jean-Pierre Jeunet  
*Mulholland Drive* (2001), directed by David Lynch  
*Air Doll* (2009), directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda



*Day of Wrath* (1943), Carl-Theodor Dreyer, Danish

# **Carl-Theodor Dreyer's Day of Wrath**

## **Tragedy, Day of Wrath, and Its Dramatic Source**

James Agee was right. One of the attributes of Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943) to admire most is connected with tragedy: "its steep, Lutheran kind of probity—that is, its absolute recognition of the responsibility of the individual, regardless of extenuating or compulsive circumstances" (304). Critics speak often of Dreyer's treatment of religious themes, his sense of history, and his austere style (Ellis, 88-89; Braudy & Dickstein, 209; Schrader, 114-115; Milne, 12-15; Pipolo, 15-28), but few recognize any tragic intentions on his part. Those that do speak of tragic intentions on Dreyer's part, do so only in passing, like Tom Milne (13), or in vague terms like Jean-Louis Cornolly (Nash, 58-59) and Ray Carney (169, 172 *et passim*); David Bordwell, for his part, argues that *Day of Wrath*'s appeal is "melodramatic" (1981: 117), as does Tag Gallagher ("Chains of Dreams"), while André Bazin simply calls the film "admirable" but "anachronistic" (24-25) and Robert Warshow deems it finally a stylistic failure (196).

The director himself, however, writes in the foreword to his *Four Screen Plays* that in the films *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Vampire* (1932), *Day of Wrath*, and *The Word* (1955)—those that are generally believed to be his best—he "ended up with a dramatic form which . . . has characteristics in common with that of tragedy. This applies particularly to *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Day of Wrath*" (7). Dreyer was convinced there was a need for a "tragic poet of the cinema," and

he felt that this poet's "first problem [would] be to find, within the cinema's framework, the form and style appropriate to tragedy" (*Four Screen Plays*, 7).

In the case of *Day of Wrath*, he created that tragic form and style through the adaptation of an historical melodrama: *Anne Pedersdotter* (1908), by the Norwegian playwright Hans Wiers-Jenssen. (Norway and Denmark were united under a single throne from 1388 to 1814, and long after the dissolution of the political bond Norwegian literary life was associated with that of the Danes.) In its day, *Anne Pedersdotter* attained a great deal of international success. By 1911, it was in the repertoire of a number of British theater companies, and in 1917 the English poet John Masefield published a widely read translation of the play. In 1918, the Italian actress Emma Gramatica (soon to become well-regarded for her film work) starred in a production of *Anne Pedersdotter* at the Teatro Nazionale in Milan; this was followed in 1921 by an Italian translation of the play, published in Milan as well. Wiers-Jenssen's drama was also well known in France in the early 1920s, and in 1926 the Russian actress Maria Ouspenskaya appeared on Broadway in a successful American production of the work. Thus by the time Carl-Theodor Dreyer saw *Anne Pedersdotter* performed in Copenhagen in 1925, it was a highly popular play (*Four Screen Plays*, 17).

Wiers-Jenssen's play is based on the well-documented case of Anne Pedersdotter, an alleged witch who was burned alive at the stake in Bergen in 1590, though the playwright sets the action in the seventeenth century (perhaps because Anne's trial is regarded as the first of many witch trials to follow in Norway in the 1600s). He constructs his drama around a set of clear and conventionalized conflicts taken from melodrama, the most dominant form of the nineteenth-century European theater. According to Miles Coiner,

The conflicts presented [in *Anne Pedersdotter*] include Christianity vs. witchcraft, God vs. Satan, men vs. women, mind vs. nature, emotions vs. rationality. Although [Wiers-Jenssen] attempts to indicate something less than a Manichaean battle between the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness, that is precisely what he ends up giving us. . . . Both the witches

and the Christians are seen to receive their power from the supernatural, and there is nothing in the play to indicate that the supernatural is not both real and powerful. We are thus confronted with a sort of war between God and Satan, where both sides behave as combatants in a war normally behave—they kill their enemies. The difference is that the witches kill to get what they selfishly desire, while the Church kills to protect itself. (128)

Convinced there was a need for a tragic poet of the cinema, Dreyer chose to adapt into tragedy a play that is set in the period—the seventeenth century—when European neoclassicism was attempting to restore to the drama classical principles derived from Aristotle and Horace. (With few exceptions, Danish drama itself—unlike that of Norway [with Bjørnson and Ibsen] and Sweden [with Strindberg and Lagerkvist]—has been dominated by comedy and satire since its beginnings in the mid-sixteenth century.) Indeed, the view of the world set forward in *Anne Pedersdotter*, and subsequently in *Day of Wrath*, is classical, not modern. And classical tragedy, be it ancient Greek, Shakespearean, or French neoclassical, depicts human beings as unwelcome guests in the world and teaches that it is better never to have been born.

Nourished by a sacred as well as hierarchical cosmology, this particular tragic flame understandably splutters and dies in the inhospitable air of our secular, democratic times, where tragedy is perceived as the ideological enemy of politics because it promotes a sense of hopelessness, defeatism, and resignation—a metaphysical pessimism that is irreconcilable with moderns' sturdy, scientific, and unquenchable belief that all problems can ultimately be solved, that humans can change any undesirable aspect of their condition. Modern tragedy, that is, replaces the ancient concern for gods, oracles, prophecy, and fate, as they affect the lives of aristocratic or otherwise highly placed characters, with psychology, sociology, and biology as they investigate heredity and environment in an attempt to improve the lives of ordinary working people. But Dreyer (and, to a lesser extent, Wiers-Jenssen before him) chose to eschew modernism, in *Day of Wrath* as elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, and anachronistically attempt to create—ironically, in

the cinema, the most contemporary of arts—classical tragedy. Perhaps he did this because Denmark itself had produced no such drama. (It was only in the eighteenth century, with the satirical comedies of Norwegian-born Ludvig Holberg—sometimes known as the Danish Molière—that Danish theatre began to prosper). Then again, perhaps Dreyer eschewed modernism, unlike all other major filmmakers with the possible exception of his fellow Scandinavian Ingmar Bergman in his early “faith” films, because he saw in the camera-eye a mechanical or technological equivalent of the all-seeing eye of God.

Insofar as Dreyer (with the assistance of Mogens Skot-Hansen and Poul Knudsen) turned Wiers-Jenssen’s melodrama into a tragedy, David Bordwell’s plot summary of *Day of Wrath* is characteristic of most writing on the film in that it ignores the subject of Absalon’s responsibility. Indeed, Bordwell writes as if he is summarizing the play and not the movie made from it:

*Day of Wrath* is the story of how, in seventeenth-century [1623] Denmark, Anne falls in love with the son of Absalon, the old pastor whom she has married. A subplot involves Herlof’s Marthe, an old woman accused of witchcraft and persecuted by the church elder Laurentius. After Herlof’s Marthe is executed, Anne and Martin share a furtive idyll. When Anne tells Absalon of the affair, the old man dies. The pastor’s elderly mother Merete accuses Anne of witchcraft. When Martin abandons her, Anne finally confesses to having been in Satan’s power and is burned as a witch. (1981: 117)

Because the pastor Absalon is reticent and because we never see him lust for his wife Anne, it is easy to fail to consider *Day of Wrath* as his tragedy. But Dreyer begins the film with the ferreting out and burning of Herlof’s Marthe as a witch precisely so that attention will focus immediately on Absalon and his actions. (Wiers-Jenssen, by contrast, begins *Anne Pedersdotter* with a scene centered around Anne, whose own character, as the title promises, is the play’s focus.) Absalon seems almost to have forgotten that he pardoned Anne’s mother, also accused of being a witch, years before when he was widowed so that

he might marry Anne, half his age. But his young wife is no different in function from his first wife: she is his companion and the mistress of his house, not the object of his sexual desire. Anne married Absalon out of obligation; and if she does not love him, she has at least accustomed herself to him.

All is apparently well in Absalon's world, then, at the start of the film. The Herlof's Marthe incident, however, changes matters. It reminds Absalon of the sin he committed to obtain Anne as his wife, and it places him in the position of sinning again, for Marthe asks him to pardon her in the same way that he pardoned Anne's mother. Absalon is thus faced with a tragic choice: spare Marthe and sin again in the eyes of God, or let her go to her death and incur guilt for having spared one witch (for selfish reasons) and not another. The necessity, and excruciating difficulty, of making this choice is emphasized in Dreyer's film by at least two scenes that are not to be found in Wiers-Jenssen's play: in one, Absalon questions Herlof's Marthe in his sacristy, and in a second scene he visits her in prison. Finally Absalon chooses to let Herlof's Marthe go to her death, and she in turn pronounces the curse that he will soon die and prophesies for Anne a fate similar to her own. His responsibility for his decision—and for his own fate—is underlined by two additional scenes not to be found in the original play, each of which serves to increase sympathy for the old woman: the stripping naked and torture of Herlof's Marthe under the watchful gaze of the assembled men of the town, and her gruesome burning to death as an angelic boys' choir sings nearby.

### **Witchcraft, Day of Wrath, and Its Historical Context**

Even though Absalon soon dies and Anne herself will be burned as a witch, *Day of Wrath*—otherwise set during the worst years of the European witch hunts—is not so much a testimony to the powers of witchcraft. Witchcraft, rather—Absalon's acceptance of its reality and the collective belief in witchcraft by the members of his community—is something Dreyer contrasts with the piety of Absalon. David Bordwell seems to support my view here when he writes:

The film, set during the worst years of the European witch-hunts, relies on a general historical awareness of the Church's

persecution of witches. . . . But what is significant is that at crucial points Dreyer's film refuses to define a position with respect to the historical phenomenon of witchcraft. Gone is most of the paraphernalia of traditional witch-lore: the witch's ability to confound neighbors, the witches' sabbath, etc. Although the apparatus of Church repression is well summarized in Laurentius's interrogation, the film remains silent about the various causes which historians have proposed for the witch-craze (religious strife, the rise of the medical profession, the retention of pagan religious customs). (1981: 125-126)

Witchcraft—setting oneself up as a rival to God—is the gravest sin to Absalon, just as forgiving witchcraft, which he did for Anne's mother, is the gravest sin that he, as a representative of God, can commit. I hesitate to use the term “tragic inevitability” with regard to this film, for it is not simply a tragedy of character. Absalon to a large extent brings on his own doom, it's true, but there is a sense in which Dreyer makes an example of him for all the world to see and be edified by. Because of the changes Dreyer made to the play that shift the focus from Anne to Absalon and thereby highlight his tragic dilemma, I stress that the director, more than witchcraft or “fate,” is making an example of the pastor. Or Dreyer the artist may be seen as his own witch-god, which explains the choice of a pastor as tragic figure and of witches as his antagonists: in such a scenario, Dreyer is the artist who wants to register his power in the universe alongside the forces of evil and the wrath of God. As he himself responded to the question, “Why does Dreyer feel drawn to tragedy?”: “Because I find it easier in tragedy to work in my own personality and my own outlook [on life]” (Skoller, 146).

Let me explain by saying that the view of tragedy I take in this essay is the one propounded by Bert O. States in *Irony and Drama: A Poetics*—a view that itself is a gloss on traditional or Aristotelian tragedy. States writes that

The idea that the victory inherent in tragedy arrives primarily in the earned nobility of the defeated-victorious hero is actually much overrated as the key to catharsis; the victory is

rather in the poet's having framed the definitive fate for his hero-victim. In turning the tables on his hero so *exactly*, getting the all into his one, he shows wherein the imagination is a match for nature in getting her to participate so thoroughly in the fault. This seems the most complete statement that can be made about destructiveness, and when the poet can arrange to make it, as Shakespeare and Sophocles have, he has posed the unanswerable argument against reality in his effort to fortify men against the many forms of disaster. In effect, he has said, "You may destroy me, but I have gone even further. I have conceived the impossible destruction." In other words, the force of tragic catharsis consists in the poet's having conceived a power beyond Power itself; as such, it would seem to be not only a purgation but something of a gorging as well. (50)

Let us not forget, moreover, that Dreyer made *Day of Wrath* in 1943 during the German occupation of Denmark (1940-45): surely a form of disaster or destruction for the Danes, if not initially then certainly by late 1943 (when what had been a largely peaceful affair met with Danish resistance—and the full extent of Nazi terror). Of the film's immediate historical context (not shared by *Anne Pedersdotter*, whose seventeenth-century setting—and focus on the delusions, superstitions and ignorance that existed in the past—make it strictly an historical drama without metaphoric or telescopic reference to the first decade of the twentieth century, when it was written), Ole Storm has noted that while

*Vredens Dag* can hardly be regarded as a Resistance film, . . . it contained unmistakable elements of the irrationality that was characteristic of Nazism: witch-hunting, mass hypnosis, assertion of power, and the primitive, always latent forces which, in certain conditions, can be exploited by any authority that knows how to license the gratification of blood-lust as an act of justice; whereby a judicial process conducted without witnesses or counsel for the defence culminates in a death sentence passed on the sole basis of a forced confession. (*Four Screen Plays*, 19)

*Day of Wrath* may contain elements of the irrationality that was characteristic of Nazism, but it also contains elements of ambiguity concerning what is good or evil and what is belief or disbelief, even deviltry—the film provides no evidence, for example, that either Herlof’s Marthe or Anne is in fact a witch. *Day of Wrath*’s thematic ambiguity, furthermore, is underlined by the film’s cinematographic style. Karl Andersson’s cinematography may be high-contrast in that it melodramatically opposes harsh shafts of light and dramatic streaks of blackness, white-washed walls and black costumes, but Andersson is careful to infuse the bold theatricalism of his filmic palette with a sense of visual anguish that suggests a more complex, irremediable, even inscrutable world—in a word, a tragic one. He does so through the use of chiaroscuro, with its diffused shadows and atmospheric pools of light that convey a feeling of unease and uncertainty if not menace and doom. In this sense, Dreyer’s film mirrors the contemporary and *post hoc* agonizing by the Danes over whether their collective acquiescence to the German occupation constituted “evil,” self-destructive collaboration, “good,” self-preserving accommodation, or something tragically in between—and what role the Danish Resistance played in all of this.

The event in *Day of Wrath* that clarifies Dreyer’s artistic purpose is the entrance of Martin, Absalon’s son by his first marriage, into the film. Martin, who has recently graduated from the seminary, is the favorite of his grandmother, Merete, just as her son Absalon was once her favorite. (Merete lives with Absalon and Anne.) Like his father before him, Martin falls in love with Anne and appears to “choose” her over Merete. It all seems a little too pat in its derivation from so many other love-triangle plots in literature and film: father and son love the same woman; the woman prefers the son; disapproving mother-grandmother looks on. In this way Merete is a kind of chorus to events as she disapproves of Anne from the start, and one finds oneself at least in part sharing her opinion for all her sternness and stridency. But the deck is stacked in *Day of Wrath* for good reason, even as it is in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.) or Racine’s *Phaedra* (1677), to whose love-triangle plots in particular the film is indebted.

To wit: Dreyer wants Absalon to go through the worst possible ordeal before dying; he wants the worst that can happen to him to

happen. Absalon the pastor is thus Dreyer's sacrificial lamb. Like his Biblical counterpart, Absalon rebels against his father, God, when he pardons a witch and marries her daughter, and he must be punished for his sin. Furthermore, he will be permitted by Dreyer to utter barely a word of protest throughout his ordeal. This is part of the strategy of outrage: Absalon committed an outrageous act in marrying the young Anne; he sincerely repents his sin of pardoning Anne's mother, but only when he is confronted, outrageously, with the possibility of committing the same sin again; and he dies at the outrageous admission by Anne that she has betrayed him with his own son. Even as he suffers the guilt of his original sin of pardoning Anne's mother, so too he does suffer the revelation of his betrayal: in this case, by simply dying. The "day of wrath" of the film's title (taken from the thirteenth-century Latin hymn *[Dies Irae]* by Thomas of Celano, the words to which begin and end Dreyer's film), of course, is a reference to Judgment Day, for Absalon as well as Herlof's Marthe and Anne—not by accident, a day when "heaven and earth [are] in ashes burning . . . /When flaming heavens together roll."

### ***King Lear, Day of Wrath, and the Question of Probability***

It was Samuel Johnson, in the Preface to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), who first complained of the improbability of Lear's proposal to divide his kingdom among his three daughters according to how much each loved him. The same complaint could be made about the staid pastor Absalon's proposing to pardon a witch and marry her young daughter: nothing in Absalon's behavior during the film, and no information Dreyer gives us about him, can account for his going to such extremes to marry so young a woman, especially when one considers the time and place in which he lives. But demands for this kind of believability in a work of art miss the forest for the trees. Like *King Lear*, *Day of Wrath* could be called, in Judah Stampfer's term, a "tragedy of penance" (375), in which the enormity of the offending act provokes the enormity of the punishment.

Stampfer makes the important point that *King Lear* is not a tragedy of hubris, like *Oedipus Rex*, but one of penance:

[The] opening movement [of *King Lear*] leads not to dissolution, exposure, and self-recognition, as in *Oedipus* and *Othello*, but to purgation. And Lear's purgation, by the end of the play's middle movement, is so complete as to be archetypal. By the time he enters prison, he has paid every price and been stripped of everything a man can lose, even his sanity, in payment for folly and pride. As such he activates an even profounder fear than the fear of failure, and that is the fear that whatever penance a man may pay may not be enough once the machinery of destruction has been set loose, because the partner of his covenant may be neither grace nor the balance of law, but malignity, intransigence, or chaos. (375)

Absalon himself repents, but it is too late, and there is no evidence that matters would be different had he repented long before the film begins. Marthe would still have dabbled in witchcraft and she would still have sought sanctuary in Absalon's home, since she herself had hidden Anne's mother and felt that the same favor was due her in return.

Dreyer has Absalon repent only when faced with the possibility of committing the same sin again, and not earlier, not because this is why he is being destroyed in the first place—for sinning monumentally *and living peacefully with that sin*—but because Absalon's late repentance, in Bert O. States's formulation, is what “rescues him from perfection in the process of being doomed” (54). That is, Dreyer singled out the pastor for destruction and invented his sin but had to have him repent belatedly to remind us of the seriousness of his transgression. The sin is dim in Absalon's own memory at the beginning of the film and in our minds, as well, for having occurred so long ago and offscreen. (Dreyer keeps it offscreen and in the past, I think, because of its very improbability). Absalon, in other words, had to appear flawed beyond his original sin of pardoning a witch and marrying Anne. And his flaw is his tardiness in repenting, his willingness to tolerate such a flaw in himself but not in his congregation, and least of all in Marthe.

Thus Dreyer makes him appear something less than irreproachable—no small accomplishment in the case of Absalon, who strikes one at first as being absolutely irreproachable. This is important, be-

cause the less irreproachable Absalon becomes the easier it is for us to witness, if not finally condone or participate in, his destruction. The destruction of a flawless or completely and quickly repentant person is too easily rationalized as pure accident or pure evil; of a bad person, as poetic justice. Neither is paid much attention. But the destruction of the person in the middle—the good one who has done wrong, yet has neither been perverted by his wrongdoing nor has atoned for it—*this* is more terrible, precisely because it is deserved, yet not deserved, and therefore inexplicable. One pays attention to it.

Indeed, what we notice about the great tragic heroes, writes Bert O. States (53-54), is that their truly dramatic flaws are not such as to worsen their characters in the moral sense, but to make them ambiguously fallible. We would not, therefore, emphasize the fact in Sophocles' version Oedipus' temper hastens his doom, but that it rescues him from perfection in the process of being doomed. . . . Here, perhaps, is the true sense of Aristotle's own idea: to mark the excellent and flawless man for destruction, or conversely the utterly bad man, is to make a statement that is less complete, less *infinite*, than to mark for destruction the median man who simultaneously deserves it (but not quite), yet does not deserve it (but not quite).

Ironically, then, even though Absalon chooses God in choosing not to pardon Marthe for her witchcraft and so could be said to be attempting to atone for the sin of pardoning Anne's mother, he still receives the maximum punishment. He chooses God and dies, unforgiven (but still loved) by his mother for having married Anne in the first place, unforgiven by Anne for having robbed her youth, alienated from his son who loves Anne as much as he does. And he is without a fellow minister at his side, as he was at Laurentius's side when the latter died in fulfillment of another of Marthe's curses.

Laurentius's sudden death in itself should not be looked on as a testimony to the powers of witchcraft. Rather, it can be seen as one more punishment inflicted upon Absalon, one more price he has to pay for the folly and pride of coveting a young woman and pardoning her witch-mother in order to get her. He pays the final price in remaining unforgiven by God Himself, Whom one might have expected to show some mercy toward Absalon. That He does not is not an argument

against God; it is an argument, using one of God's own as an example, for the fallibility of the human and the inscrutability of the divine. It is an argument that the worst in humanity—the worst or the flaw in a good human being—is combated by the worst in God or simply the universe, and as such it is a form of purgation. In a sense, this is *the worst that can happen*, and from that we can take comfort, for it has not happened to us and most likely will not happen to us. Dreyer, finally, has been the engineer of all this, as much to fortify himself against the many forms of disaster, to use Bert O. States's words (50), as to assert his own imagination's place as a force in the universe to be reckoned with.

I should like to return here to *King Lear*, about which Judah Stampfer further remarks that "there is no mitigation in Lear's death, hence no mitigation in the ending of the play. . . . *King Lear* is Shakespeare's first tragedy in which the tragic hero dies unreconciled and indifferent to society" (366, 371). Lear dies, and there is no one from his family to carry on in his place: with him have died Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Absalon dies unredeemed and bewildered, but there is someone from his family to carry on in his place: his son, who turns on Anne and, with his grandmother, accuses her of witchcraft in willing the death of his father. *Day of Wrath* ends with our knowledge that Anne will burn as a witch and with the suggestion that Martin will take over his father's duties as pastor. Martin will occupy the role Absalon filled after the death of his first wife, before he met Anne and pardoned her mother: that of pastor, living with his (grand)mother. Anne's mother has been dead for some time (presumably of natural causes), Absalon is dead, and Anne will die: their sins, if not Martin's own, will thus be completely expiated.

## ***Day of Wrath* and the Technique of Counterpoint**

Matters will be returned to a seeming state of grace, then. But we do not *see* them returned to a state of grace. We do not see Anne burn, as we did Marthe, and we do not see Martin become pastor. Dreyer's overriding concern is still with Absalon's destruction, not his society's redemption. Whatever reconciliation we get at the end of the film occurs less in the sense that wrong is righted than in the sense that wrong is *counterpointed*. Absalon yielded to temptation with Anne and is ult-

mately undone by it, whereas Martin, who also yields to such temptation, is able to reverse it and reject Anne; Dreyer juxtaposes the chaos of Absalon's life against the newfound order of Martin's so as to point up the irrevocability of that chaos, as well as the tentativeness of that order.

Dreyer uses this technique of counterpoint again when he intercuts the scene of Absalon returning from the dead Laurentius's house with the one of Martin and Anne in the parsonage, where she wishes Absalon dead. The relationship between these two scenes might seem too obvious, especially when Absalon remarks at one point on the strength of the wind that "It was as if death brushed against my sleeve" (*Four Screen Plays*, 211). But Dreyer is not necessarily telling us here only that Anne is willing Absalon's death, that even as she wishes his death, he feels it coming. He may also be telling us of Absalon's own sense of his impending doom, of his punishment for his sin. He sees trouble coming, or at least feels very uneasy, outdoors as well as indoors—indeed, he can find no peace anywhere.

Earlier Dreyer had intercut a scene of him at home, full of remorse for having pardoned Anne's mother to marry her daughter, with a scene of Anne and Martin wandering blissfully in the fields at night. She seems to feel no guilt indoors or outdoors for betraying her husband and for wishing him dead; Absalon, for his part, *can* feel guilt for his sins, for his violation of a higher law than the law of self. Anne is, in this way, less the instrument of his doom than its counterpoint. Even the way in which Anne acknowledges her witchcraft and affirms her sentence to burn at the stake, after Martin renounces her, stands in direct counterpoint to the way that Absalon receives the revelation of his betrayal and her accusation that he robbed her youth; and this juxtaposition makes the circumstances of Absalon's death clearer.

Absalon dies immediately of a heart attack out of guilt and out of shock at the extremity of his punishment. Anne, by contrast, coolly—yet tearfully—accepts death-by-burning as Absalon's "revenge" on her. Paradoxically robed in white, she confesses on demand that she killed Absalon "with the Evil One's help" and that she lured Martin into her power; but it remains unclear whether she admits guilt because she truly believes she has played a part in her husband's death, or because she no longer wants to live in a world bereft of his son's love for her.

And this lack of clarity, this ambivalence, has been part of Anne's character from the start as her face and eyes are depicted by Dreyer: her eyes are described in different ways at different moments in the film by different men, and leaves as well as latticework window-panes partly obscure her face in shadow from time to time.

*Day of Wrath*, then, counterpoints witchcraft with piety, indulgence with abstinence, evil with good. In the process, the film "gorges" itself on Absalon's destruction; but all the while it reassures us that what happens to him cannot happen to us, it warns us that some form of destruction or misfortune lies in wait for everyone. That is its underpinning: Dreyer not only takes out his frustrations absolutely on Absalon, he also is sure to include himself and, by extension, the audience as a potential, if less serious, victim of a malevolent universe. This he does through the character of Martin and the film's visual style. Dreyer is careful not to have Martin succumb fully, in the end, to Anne's temptations: he must have a scare but must survive, his good intentions, if not his virtue, intact, as the character with whom one may identify most. Through Martin, Dreyer posits the existence of two separate worlds, the one safe, rational, and certain, the other dangerous, irrational, uncertain; and he shows how simple it is to cross from one world to the next with a single action. Martin rejects Anne at the last minute and remains on the safe side of life.

## **Visual Style in *Day of Wrath***

Let me now turn in more detail to the visual style itself of *Day of Wrath*. I said at the start of this essay that many critics have remarked on the austerity and stateliness of Dreyer's style, especially in comparison with what has become known as "classical film style" as developed chiefly by American mainstream film. The visual style of such cinema has been characterized by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson as a 180° system consisting of a series of rules of thumb designed to maintain so-called natural spatial and chronological continuity—a "naturalization" of cinematic space comparable to that found in realistic or mimetic painting, with its linear perspectives and naturalistic presentation (Bordwell, 2010: 104, 180, 229 *et passim*). Paul Schrader writes of Dreyer's filmic style, by contrast, that

the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *Kammerspiele* (literally, “chamber plays”) were the immediate stylistic precedents for Dreyer’s films. . . . In each of Dreyer’s films one can detect elements of *Kammerspiele*: intimate family drama, fixed interior settings, unembellished sets, long takes emphasizing staging, the use of gesture and facial expression to convey psychological states, plain language, and a thoroughgoing sobriety. (114-115)

However, Dreyer contrasts the seeming sureness and reason, the spatial and chronological continuity, of this style in *Day of Wrath* with the disorientation and unreason of another style that he puts side by side with it—a style characterized, according to David Bordwell, by “systematic changes of camera orientation” (124) and the discontinuity that results from such changes. As such, Dreyer, according to Edvin Kau, “is clearly not interested in presenting the audience with ‘realistic’ scenes which possess continuity in space and time.” Instead, he

focuses on making use of what are actually abstract cinematic elements, and on finding various ways to combine these in . . . a structure, presented on the screen as ideas, relations between the characters, or even attempts to interpret all of these. Here we can see . . . the dissolution of space through the presentation of multidimensional psychological space by the omnipresent, liberated camera. It is a choice of style that also represents a narrative attitude to the chosen material— . . . the visual style contributes to maintaining a balance between empathy and discussion, provoking questions and reflection rather than providing answers and ready-made conclusions. The visual style turns his work into a centrifugal and dialogue-provoking piece of cinematic art . . . [in which] non-centered and non-stable film universes . . . are key . . . No individual character and no fixed camera perspective can provide a secure center. (Kau, “Camera and Space”)

Several times, for example, Dreyer shoots a character from one angle and then cuts to a shot of the same character from the reverse

angle; or he cuts from one character to another, then returns to the first at an angle that confuses the viewer as to the place of the characters in the room and their relation to each other. In the scene between Absalon and his mother subsequent to the burning-to-death of Herlof's Marthe (in a room where the pastor has been praying), during which he admits to "sinning against God" and she declares that "the day may come when [her son] must choose between Anne and God," Dreyer precipitously cuts—thereby crossing the 180° axis after a long take of a two-shot of Merete and her son, at the end of which she sits down at a table with him—to a medium close shot of her from an angle *behind* him. This shot itself is followed by multiple, quick shot-reverse shots, in medium close-up, between Merete and Absalon (full-frontal of him, but from the same angle, behind Absalon's chair, of her) before she stands and goes to put her arm around her son.

We see a similar sequence of shots in the scene between Merete and Martin—after Absalon's attendance at Laurentius's deathbed—in which he asks her why she doesn't like Anne, to which she responds, "*I hate* her. The only grief your father ever caused me was bringing *her* into this house." This scene begins with Martin writing at a desk in the same room where his grandmother knits at a table. First we see several full-frontal, shot-reverse shots between the two of them, in medium range, and then Dreyer suddenly cuts to a more distant profile shot of Merete into which Martin slowly walks before sitting down at the table opposite his grandmother. What follows is a long take of a two-shot during which each character remains in profile, at the end of which the camera again suddenly cuts to a full-frontal shot of Merete in medium range as she stands, says "Good night" to Martin, and leaves the room. The last shot of the scene is of Martin, who remains behind in profile with his head slightly bowed.

The effect of shot sequences like this is less to suggest that objective reality does not exist, that people and things can be looked at and interpreted in any number of ways, than to give the viewer a sense of the changeability of affairs from moment to moment, a sense of a world in which a permanent state or even complete knowledge of oneself is impossible. In other words, as with his characterization of Martin, so too with his visual style is Dreyer attempting to posit the existence of

two separate worlds: the one orderly, the other unsettled and possibly chaotic. (Dreyer posits the existence of two separate worlds, as well, in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. But in this film, Dreyer's purpose in subverting the classical stylistic relationship between narrative logic and cinematic space is to construct a formal space for the sacred—that of Joan—untouched by the space of the profane—that of her inquisitors.) Even as the camera can change worlds from shot to shot, so too can a person change his or her “world” from one action to the next: except that the camera can go back, can reclaim the orderly after a plunge into disorder.

Such an action is not so easy for a human being. Martin comes as close as possible to doing it at the end of *Day of Wrath* when he goes from loving Anne and swearing that she is not a witch, to despising her and swearing that she is. The kind of dramatic tension thus created perhaps constitutes the essence of tragedy: the kind of tension wherein the viewer feels that the outcome of the action is inevitable at the same time as he or she feels that, even though the outcome may be inevitable, *something* could be done along the way, or even at the very end, to alter the course of events. (Hence dramatic terms like “turning point” and “moment of final suspense.”) Or that alternative values exist somewhere, along with an alternative world. The alternative world is peopled by Martin in *Day of Wrath*, as I have posited, even as the chaotic or unsettled world is inhabited by Absalon.

Since *Day of Wrath* is an adaptation of a play, Dreyer includes in it offstage action—scenes that in the film’s source, *Anne Pedersdotter*, are only reported by characters. I am thinking specifically of Anne and Martin’s meeting in the fields at night and Absalon’s return home from the dead Laurentius’s house. These outdoor scenes themselves create a rhythmic tension in the film. But the tension here does not derive from the intercutting of outdoor and indoor scenes. It comes from the tilting or craning upward of the camera one moment to the trees above the lovers Anne and Martin (something that happens in two other instances when these two are alone in the fields), implying that God is judging their sinful actions below; and the leveling of the camera the next moment at the unhappy, fearful, penitent Absalon in the same outdoors to the exclusion of the heavens above, implying that God is

not present and will not grant mercy to him. In one instance it seems that the world is inhabited by a just and rational God, in the other that no such God exists. In this way, the outdoor scenes give Dreyer further opportunity to dramatize the two separate worlds he demarcated so tellingly indoors.

### ***Day of Wrath and Religion, or Comfort and Caution***

I have remarked several times in this essay on the reticence of Absalon: his lack of reflection on, and of exasperation with, what is happening to him compared with Lear. This is the factor that has, up to now, caused critics to look outside his character—namely, to witchcraft and the mysterious—for the key to the film's intentions (Warshow, 235-236; Braudy & Dickstein, 209). I want now only to explain more precisely Absalon's silence, almost his *absence*, since it is so unusual a trait in a character so important and so obviously intelligent. Dreyer makes Absalon silent and passive because *we are not so*, or we think we are not. Absalon's behavior in the face of his misfortune, to us, is one of the worst things that can happen: he does not object (like Lear); he does not run (as Oedipus did from Corinth); he does not suspect or seek counsel (like Othello). We can picture ourselves in all these actions. This is a comfort: we think that we would fight back and perhaps prevail or escape, forgetting momentarily what happened to Lear, Oedipus, and Othello.

Thus, part of the art of *Day of Wrath* in my reading of the film is that it beguiles us into thinking we are different, and therefore better off, in a way that Shakespeare and Sophocles do not; then it reminds us, through the character of Martin as well as through its visual style, that we are vulnerable. In other words, it gives us the greatest comfort, and it gives us good caution. If *Day of Wrath* was, as Paul Schrader (127) and Robert Warshow before him (236) believe, one of the first films to attempt to create a “religious system,” it succeeds less in the sense that it evokes God than in the sense that it does for us what religion at its best, and art only rarely, do for us: it makes us feel that we are chosen at the same time as it makes us feel we are expendable or incapable.

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*The Witches* (1967), directed by Mauro Bolognini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, & Franco Rossi

*Rosemary's Baby* (1967), directed by Roman Polanski

*Witchfinder General* (1968), directed by Michael Reeves

*The Devils* (1971), directed by Ken Russell

*Season of the Witch* (1972), directed by George A. Romero

*The Wicker Man* (1973), directed by Robin Hardy

*The Witches* (1990), directed by Nicolas Roeg

*The Crucible* (1996), directed by Nicholas Hytner





*Miracle in Milan* (1951), Vittorio De Sica, Italian

## **Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan***

### **Italian Neorealism**

The term “neorealism” was first applied by the critic Antonio Pietrangeli to Luchino Visconti’s *Obsession* (1942), and the style came to fruition in the mid-to-late forties in such films of Roberto Rossellini, Visconti, and Vittorio De Sica as *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Paisan* (1947), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and *The Earth Trembles* (1948). These pictures reacted not only against the banality that had long been the dominant mode of Italian cinema, but also against prevailing socio-economic conditions in Italy. With minimal resources, the neorealist filmmakers worked in real locations using local people as well as professional actors; they improvised their scripts, as need be, on site; and their films conveyed a powerful sense of the plight of ordinary individuals oppressed by political circumstances beyond their control. Thus Italian neorealism was the first postwar cinema to liberate film-making from the artificial confines of the studio and, by extension, from the Hollywood-originated studio system. But neorealism was the expression of an entire moral or ethical philosophy, as well, and not simply just another new cinematic style.

De Sica, Visconti, and Rossellini attempted to create a cinema of social conscience and eschewed the gaudy costume dramas, historical epics, and propaganda films that had constituted the bulk of Italy’s production. “We sought to redeem our guilt,” De Sica himself said, looking back on the movement he helped to begin. “We strove to look

ourselves in the eyes and tell ourselves the truth, to discover who we really were, and to seek salvation" (Leprohon, 98, from an interview in *La Table ronde*, May 1960). But the neorealists' mission was perhaps best described by one of neorealism's lesser-known practitioners, Alberto Lattuada, who wrote in June 1945:

So we're in rags? Then let us show our rags to the world. So we're defeated? Then let us contemplate our disasters. So we owe them to the Mafia? To hypocrisy? To conformism? Then let us pay our debts with a fierce love of honesty, and the world will be moved to participate in this great combat with truth. The confession will throw light on our hidden virtues, our faith in life, our immense Christian brotherhood. We will meet at last with comprehension and esteem. The cinema is unequaled for revealing all the basic truths about a nation. (Cardullo, 61)

Ignoring the complaint of commercial Italian filmmakers of the early post-war era that there could be little profit in thus airing Italy's dirty secrets when economic prosperity was just around the corner, the neorealists made gritty, scaled-down films that took the problems of contemporary life head-on.

Still, the post-World War II birth or creation of neorealism was anything but a collective theoretical enterprise—the origins of Italian neorealist cinema were far more complex than that. Generally stated, its roots were political, in that neorealism reacted ideologically to the control and censorship of the prewar cinema; aesthetic, for the intuitive, imaginative response of neorealist directors coincided with the rise or resurgence of realism in Italian literature, particularly the novels of Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Vasco Pratolini (a realism that can be traced to the veristic style first cultivated in the Italian cinema between 1913 and 1916, when films inspired by the writings of Giovanni Verga and others dealt with human problems as well as social themes in natural settings); and economic, in that this new realism posed basic solutions to the lack of funds, of functioning studios, and of working equipment.

Indeed, what is sometimes overlooked in the growth of the neorealist movement in Italy is the fact that some of its most admired as-

pects sprang from the dictates of postwar adversity: a shortage of money made shooting in real locations an imperative choice over the use of expensive studio sets, and against such locations any introduction of the phony or the fake would appear glaringly obvious, whether in the appearance of the actors or the style of the acting. It must have been paradoxically exhilarating for neorealist filmmakers to be able to stare unflinchingly at the tragic spectacle of a society in shambles, its values utterly shattered, after years of making nice little movies approved by the powers that were within the walls of Cinecittà.

In fact, it was the Fascists who, in 1937, opened Cinecittà, the largest and best-equipped movie studio in all of Europe. Like the German Nazis and the Russian Communists, the Italian Fascists realized the power of cinema as a medium of propaganda, and when they came to power, they took over the film industry. Although this meant that those who opposed Fascism could not make movies and that foreign pictures were censored, the Fascists helped to establish the essential requirements for a flourishing postwar film industry. In 1935 they founded the Centro Sperimentale in Rome, a film school headed by Luigi Chiarini, which taught all aspects of movie production. Many important neorealist directors attended this school, including Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luigi Zampa, Pietro Germi, and Giuseppe De Santis (but not Vittorio De Sica); it also produced cameramen, editors, and technicians. Moreover, Chiarini was allowed to publish *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*), the film journal that later became the official voice of neorealism. Once Mussolini fell from power, then, the stage was set for a strong left-wing cinema.

The Axis defeat happened to transform the Italian film industry into a close approximation of the ideal market of classical economists: a multitude of small producers engaged in fierce competition. There were no clearly dominant firms among Italian movie producers, and the Italian film industry as a whole exhibited considerable weakness. The very atomization and weakness of a privately owned and profit-oriented motion-picture industry, however, led to a *de facto* tolerance toward the left-wing ideology of neorealism. In addition, the political climate of postwar Italy was favorable to the rise of cinematic neorealism, since this artistic movement was initially a product of the

spirit of resistance fostered by the Partisan movement. The presence of Nenni Socialists (Pietro Nenni was Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Communists in the Italian government from 1945 to 1947 contributed to the governmental tolerance of neorealism's left-wing ideology, as did the absence of censorship during the 1945-49 period.

Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* became the landmark film in the promulgation of neorealist ideology. It so completely reflected the moral and psychological atmosphere of its historical moment that this picture alerted both the public and the critics—on the international level (including the United States) as well as the national one—to a new direction in Italian cinema. Furthermore, the conditions of its production (relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, post-synchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, limited financial backing) did much to create many of the myths surrounding neorealism. With a daring combination of styles and tones—from the use of documentary footage to the deployment of the most blatant melodrama, from the juxtaposition of comic relief with the most tragic human events—Rossellini almost effortlessly captured forever the tension and drama of the Italian experience during the German occupation and the Partisan struggle against the Nazi invasion.

## **De Sica and Zavattini**

If, practically speaking, Rossellini at once introduced Italian cinematic neorealism to the world, De Sica's collaborator Cesare Zavattini—with whom he forged one of the most fruitful writer-director partnerships in the history of cinema—eventually became the theoretical spokesman for the neorealists. By his definition, neorealism does not concern itself with superficial themes and synthetic forms; in his famous manifesto “Some Ideas on the Cinema,” Zavattini declares that the camera has a “hunger for reality,” and that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the historical richness as well as the political importance of actual, everyday life (217-218).

Although inconsistently or irregularly observed, the basic tenets of this new realism were threefold: to portray real or everybody people

(using nonprofessional actors) in actual settings, to examine socially significant themes (the genuine problems of living), and to promote the organic development of situations as opposed to the arbitrary manipulation of events (i.e., the real flow of life, in which complications are seldom resolved by coincidence, contrivance, or miracle). These tenets were clearly opposed to the prewar cinematic style that used polished actors on studio sets, conventional and even fatuous themes, and artificial, gratuitously resolved plots—the very style, of course, that De Sica himself had employed in the four pictures he made from 1940 to 1942 (*Red Roses* [1940], *Maddalena*, *Zero for Conduct* [1941], *Teresa Venerdì* [1941], and *A Garibaldian in the Convent* [1942]).

Unfortunately, this was the cinematic style that the Italian public continued to demand after the war, despite the fact that during it such precursors of neorealism as Visconti's *Obsession* and De Sica's own *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943) had offered a serious alternative. Indeed, it was as early as 1942, when *Obsession* and *The Children Are Watching Us* were either being made or released, that the idea of the cinema was being transformed in Italy. Influenced by French cinematic realism as well as by prevailing Italian literary trends, Visconti shot *Obsession* on location in the region of Romagna; the plot and atmosphere (based on James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934]) were seamy in addition to steamy, and did not adhere to the polished, resolved structures of conventional Italian movies. Visconti's film was previewed in the spring of 1943 and quickly censored, not to be appreciated until after the war.

Around the same time, Gianni Franciolini's *Headlights in the Fog* (1941) was portraying infidelity among truck drivers and seamstresses, while Alessandro Blasetti's *Four Steps in the Clouds* (1942)—co-scripted by Zavattini and starring De Sica's wife at the time, Giuditta Rissoni—was being praised for its return to realism in a warm-hearted story of peasant life shot in natural settings. De Sica, too, was dissatisfied with the general state of the Italian cinema, and, after the relative success of his formulaic films, he felt it was time for a new challenge. Like Zavattini, who had by now achieved a measure of screenwriting success, De Sica wanted to do some serious work in which he expressed his ideas about human problems and human values. And he

did so throughout the 1940s and well into the 1950s in such neorealist works, subsequent to *The Children Are Watching Us*, as *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *Umberto D.* (1952), and *The Roof* (1956)—all of them scripted or co-written by Zavattini.

## ***Miracle in Milan: Creation and Interpretation***

Zavattini was one of the few, incidentally, who always felt that *Bicycle Thieves*—surely De Sica's best-known film—fell somewhat short of perfection, despite its registering of a visually austere rather than a picturesquely lush Rome. The movie's pathos strayed a little too close to pulp fiction for his taste, with De Sica a touch too canny in making his audience cry—aided once again by the mood music of Alessandro Cicognini. Still, Zavattini viewed his work on this project as a present to his good friend and trusted colleague. And De Sica, for his part, felt an immediate urge to reciprocate by turning for their next film to a subject that his collaborator had long held dear. The idea of Zavattini's fable or fairy tale for children and adults alike had gone through many stages: his early story “Let's Give Everybody a Hobbyhorse” (1938); a treatment or outline in 1940 with the actor-director Totò in mind; a novel called *Totò the Good* that was published in 1943; a working script titled *The Poor Disturb*; and eventually the final screenplay of *Miracle in Milan* in 1951, which Zavattini prepared in tandem with Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Mario Chiari, Adolfo Franci, and De Sica himself.

The film opens on a painting by Pieter Brueghel over which, as it comes to life, the words “Once upon a time” are superimposed, followed shortly afterward by the discovery by an old woman, Lolotta (played by Emma Gramatica), of a naked child in the cabbage patch of her garden. This is the orphan Totò, and we follow his adventures as he grows up, becoming, through his natural optimism and innocent ability to locate a glimmer of poetry in the harshest reality, a prop or support to everyone with whom he comes into contact. After his foster mother's death, Totò is living in a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan when oil is discovered on the squatters' stretch of land. The rich, headed by the industrialist Mobbi, move in to exploit the situation, and the homeless people are forced to fight the police hired to evacuate them. Aided by a symbolic white dove that pos-

sesses the power to create miracles—the dove being a gift from the departed Lolotta, who is now her foster son's guardian angel—Totò had endeavored to improve the earthly life of the poor, if only by making the elusive winter sun appear and beam down on them. But dove or no dove, the squatters are finally no match for the fat cats of this world; so Totò's only resource is to have his dispossessed charges snatch up the broomsticks of street cleaners and miraculously fly to a land "where there is only peace, love, and good."

*Miracle in Milan* is understandably regarded as one of the outstanding stylistic contradictions of the neorealist period: neorealist in action—the struggle to found, and maintain, a shantytown for the homeless—this movie undercuts that action at nearly every moment with unabashed clowning both in performance and cinematic technique (special effects abound). However, this blend of stark verism and comic fantasy, which featured a cast that mixed numerous nonprofessionals (culled from the streets of suburban Milan) with professional leads, was not in the end such a thematic departure from De Sica's earlier neorealist films as it might at first seem: the familiar concern for the underprivileged was strongly there, as were the harsh social realities seen once again through the eyes of a child who grows up yet remains a boy full of wonder and faith; and a seriocomic tension may underlie all of *Miracle in Milan*, but it can also be found in the "teamwork" between both big daddy Ricci and little boy Bruno in *Bicycle Thieves*, as well as between the old man and his small dog in *Umberto D*.

As for the leftist criticism that the picture's use of the fanciful, even the burlesque or farcical, increasingly overshadows its social commentary about the exploitation and disenfranchisement of the underclass in an industrialized nation, one can respond that there is in fact an element of despair and pessimism, of open-ended spiritual quandary, in the fairy-tale happy ending of *Miracle in Milan*. For this finale implies that the poor-in-body but pure-in-soul have no choice but to soar to the skies and seek their heaven apart from the hopeless earth—which is to say only in their imaginations. For his part, De Sica (unlike the staunchly leftist, even Communist, Zavattini) liked to downplay the satirical overtones of *Miracle in Milan*, characteristically maintaining that he wanted to bring to the screen, apart from any political consid-

erations, a Christian or simply humanist sense of solidarity: i.e., the idea that all men should learn to be good to one another.

Not everyone was content to see the movie in such simple terms, however. The Vatican condemned it for depicting the birth of a child from a cabbage, while some right-wing critics, assessing the angle of the squatters' flight at the end over the Cathedral of Milan—not to speak of the clash between the fedora-hatted rich and the grubby but kindly have-nots—figured that they were heading east, that is, towards Moscow! Predictably, from the left came the accusation, as we have already seen, that the excess of whimsy in *Miracle in Milan* had sweetened the bitter pill of neorealism beyond recognition. Cinephiles from abroad turned out to be less ideologically prickly: *Miracle in Milan* shared the 1951 Grand Prix at Cannes and also won the New York Film Critics' award for best foreign film of the year.

It's not surprising that *Miracle in Milan* baffled so many when it was first screened, including those who thought they liked it, for the Italian cinema had never really produced anything remotely like it before. The sheer irrational magic of René Clair in combination with the irrepressibly bittersweet charm of Charlie Chaplin had, up to now, not found its equivalent among indigenous filmmakers. *Miracle in Milan* consciously springs from the legacy of Clair and Chaplin, but transposes it to a forlorn urban landscape that could only be identified with Italian neorealism.

Furthermore, for all its undeniable quaintness, the movie now seems more topical than ever with its warring choruses of real-estate speculators and its huddled masses longing to become selfish consumers themselves. Thus Zavattini's social conscience is linked to a sublime anarchy all its own, particularly once the squatters' village is graced by the heavenly dove that can grant any wish. By this means, a black man and a white girl may exchange races out of mutual love, yet a tramp tries to satisfy his desire not only for millions of *lire*, but also for many more millions than anyone else. A glorious, richly meaningful anomaly in De Sica's directorial career, *Miracle in Milan* remains more miraculous than ever, enhanced by both the consummate cinematography of G. R. Aldo (a.k.a. Aldo Graziati) and a melodious score by the ever canny Alessandro Cicognini.

## Beyond Neorealism

Although neorealism was gradually phased out of the Italian cinema in the early 1950s—precisely the years, ironically, when *Miracle and Milan* and later *Umberto D.* were made—as economic conditions improved and film producers succumbed to the growing demand for escapist entertainment, the movement's effects have been far-reaching. Neorealism's influence on French New Wave directors like François Truffaut is a matter of record, but its impact on the American cinema has generally been ignored. For, in the postwar work of American moviemakers as diverse as Nicholas Ray (*They Live by Night*, 1948), Elia Kazan (*Boomerang!*, 1947), Jules Dassin (*The Naked City*, 1948), Joseph Losey (*The Lawless*, 1950), Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul*, 1947), and Edward Dmytryk (*Crossfire*, 1947), stylistic elements of neorealism can be found together with neorealism's thematic concern with social and political problems. The Italian movement has even had a profound impact on filmmakers in countries that once lacked strong national cinemas of their own, such as India, where Satyajit Ray adopted a typically neorealist stance in his Apu trilogy, outstanding among whose three films is *Pather Panchali* (1955).

In Italy itself, neorealist principles were perpetuated first, not by Michelangelo Antonioni, but by Federico Fellini. To wit, with its grotesque processions of fancily as well as raggedly dressed extras against an almost abstract horizon, *Miracle in Milan* is “Fellinian” two or more years before Fellini became so. Neorealist principles were perpetuated not only by Fellini and Antonioni but also by the first as well as the second generation of filmmakers to succeed them. Among members of the first generation we may count Ermanno Olmi, with his compassionate studies of working-class life like *Il posto* (*The Job*, 1961), and Francesco Rosi, with his vigorous attacks on the abuse of power such as *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961). These two directors are joined, among others, by Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Accattone*, 1961), Vittorio De Seta (*Bandits of Orgosolo*, 1961), Marco Bellocchio (*Fist in His Pocket*, 1965), and the Taviani brothers, Vittorio and Paolo (*Padre Padrone*, 1977). And these filmmakers themselves have been followed by Gianni Amelio (*Stolen Children*, 1990), Nanni Moretti (*The Mass Is Ended*, 1988), Giuseppe Tornatore (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1988), and Maurizio Nichetti (*The Icicle Thief*, 1989), to name

only the most prominent beneficiaries of the influence of neorealism—and of perhaps its most exceptional film, *Miracle in Milan*.

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## **Filmography: Key Works of Italian Neorealism**

*Obsession* (1942), directed by Luchino Visconti

*Rome, Open City* (1945), directed by Roberto Rossellini

*Shoeshine* (1946), directed by Vittorio De Sica

*The Bandit* (1946), directed by Alberto Lattuada

*Paisan* (1946), directed by Roberto Rossellini

*To Live in Peace* (1946), directed by Luigi Zampa

*Germany, Year Zero* (1947), directed by Roberto Rossellini

*The Sun Rises Again* (1947), directed by Aldo Vergano

*Tragic Hunt* (1947), directed by Giuseppe De Santis

*Bicycle Thieves* (1948), directed by Vittorio De Sica

*The Earth Trembles* (1948), directed by Luchino Visconti

*Difficult Years* (1948), directed by Luigi Zampa

*Without Pity* (1948), directed by Alberto Lattuada

*Escape to France* (1948), directed by Mario Soldati

*Bitter Rice* (1949), directed by Giuseppe De Santis

*Heaven over the Marshes* (1949), directed by Augusto Genina

*The Mill on the Po* (1949 ), directed by Alberto Lattuada

*In the Name of the Law* (1949), directed by Pietro Germi

*Springtime in Italy* (1949 ), directed by Renato Castellani

*Sunday in August* (1950), directed by Luciano Emmer

*No Peace among the Olives Trees* (1950), directed by Giuseppe De Santis

*The Road to Hope* (1950), directed by Pietro Germi

*Miracle in Milan* (1951), directed by Vittorio De Sica

*Two Cents' Worth of Hope* (1951 ), directed by Renato Castellani

*Watch Out, Bandits!* (1951 ), directed by Carlo Lizzani

*Rome, Eleven O'Clock* (1952), directed by Giuseppe De Santis  
*Europe '51* (1952), directed by Roberto Rossellini

*Umberto D.* (1952), directed by Vittorio De Sica

*The Roof* (1956), directed by Vittorio De Sica

*Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), directed by Luchino Visconti





*The Seven Samurai* (1954), Akira Kurosawa, Japanese

## Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*

### A Man for All Cinemas

The genius of Akira Kurosawa (1910-98) was manifold all through his long career. Prodigiously, prodigiously, he moved with ease and mastery and style from the most mysteriously interior to the most spectacular. *Ikiru* (1952) is about a dusty civil servant in postwar Japan doomed by cancer; *The Seven Samurai* (1954)—one of the great art works of the twentieth century—is an historical epic about honor as a predestined anachronism. Contrasts from his filmography could be multiplied: *Stray Dog* (1949) is a crime-detection story; Kurosawa's version of Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* (1951) is so atypical in style that it's hard to believe the film was made between *Ikiru* and *Rashomon* (1950)—itself a Pirandellian study, with somber overtones, on the relativity of truth or the impossibility of absolutes; and *Record of a Living Being* (1955) is about an old Japanese man who wants to migrate with his large family to Brazil to escape the next atomic war.

Indeed, Kurosawa could be called a man of all genres, all periods, and all places, bridging in his work the traditional and the modern, the old and the new, the cultures of the East and the West. His period dramas, for example, each have a contemporary significance, and, like his modern films, they are typified by a strong compassion for their characters, a deep but unsentimental, almost brusque humanism that mitigates the violence that surrounds them, and an abiding concern for the ambiguities of human existence. Perhaps most startling of Kurosawa's

achievements in a Japanese context, however, was his innate grasp of a storytelling technique that is not culture-bound, as well as his flair for adapting Western classical literature to the screen. No other Japanese director would have dared to set *The Idiot*, Gorky's *Lower Depths* (1957), or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957) and *King Lear* (*Ran*, 1985) in Japan. (The intercultural influence has been reciprocated: *Rashomon* directly inspired the American remake titled *The Outrage* [1964]; *The Seven Samurai* was openly imitated in the Hollywood movie called *The Magnificent Seven* [1960]; the Italian "spaghetti western" *A Fistful of Dollars* [1967] was pirated from *Yojimbo* [1961]; and *Star Wars* [1977] was derived from *The Hidden Fortress* [1958].)

But Kurosawa also adapted works from the Japanese Kabuki theater (*Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*, 1945) and used Noh staging techniques, as well as music, in both *Throne of Blood* and *Kagemusha* (1980). Indeed, he succeeded in adapting not only musical instrumentation from Noh theater but also Japanese popular songs, in addition to Western boleros and Beethoven. (Kurosawa remarked in 1980, in a *Film Comment* interview [Yakir, 57], that his generation and the ones to follow grew up on music that was more Western in quality than Japanese, with the paradoxical result that their own native music can sound artificially exotic to contemporary Japanese audiences.) Like his counterparts and most admired models, Jean Renoir, John Ford, and Kenji Mizoguchi, he thus took his filmic inspirations from the full store of world cinema, literature, and music.

## **Kurosawa and the West**

As for the suggestion, as a result, that Kurosawa was too "Western" to be a good Japanese director, he himself always insisted on his simultaneous Japanese and internationalist outlook. As he declared in the *Film Comment* interview cited above, "I am a man who likes Sotatsu, Gyokudo, and Tessai in the same way as Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Rouault. I collect old Japanese lacquerware as well as antique French and Dutch glassware. In short, the Western and the Japanese could actually be said to live side by side in my mind, without the least sense of conflict" (56). To be sure, along with other Japanese directors and with Satyajit Ray (whose *Pather Panchali* introduced Indian cine-

ma to the West in 1955), Kurosawa's films share a liability to remoteness in Western eyes—in his case, not in style or subject matter but in the performative details of gesture and reaction. Yet his work is less affected by cultural distance than that of most Asian directors.

Hence it was not by accident that the first Japanese director to become known in the West was Akira Kurosawa, when *Rashomon* won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, together with a Special Oscar as best foreign-language picture of the same year. Up to then, although the Japanese film industry had been enormously active, with high annual production figures, it might as well have been situated on the moon as far as the West was concerned. World War II was not a prime reason for the gap; relatively few Japanese films had been seen in Europe and America before 1939. (When *Rashomon* opened in New York, it was the first Japanese film to be shown there since 1937.) The barrier to import was financial, not political—the same barrier that obstructs the import of foreign literature.

The cultural shock that followed from the Venice Festival showing of *Rashomon* was a smaller mirror image of the shock felt in Japan a century earlier when Commodore Perry dropped in for a visit. Then the Japanese had learned of a technological civilization about which they knew very little; now Westerners learned of a highly developed film art about which they knew even less. It was lucky that they learned of Japanese film art through Kurosawa, for he was not merely a good director. He was one of the cinema's great masters, whose masterpiece, in this case, typically came from stimuli Eastern and Western: as he pointed out in a 1992 conversation with me, from the spirit of the French avant-garde films of the 1920s, as well as from *Rashomon*'s literary source, two short stories about medieval Japan by the twentieth-century Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa.

## **Something Like a Biography**

At the time *Rashomon* took the world by surprise, no one in the West could have known, of course, that Kurosawa was already a well-established director in his own country. Moreover, his career tells us something, prototypically, about the Japanese film world. He was born in Tokyo in 1910, the son of an army officer of samurai descent

who became a teacher of physical education. Kurosawa, unattracted to his father's professions, studied painting at the Doshusha School of Western Painting. (Note its name.) Then in 1936 he saw an advertisement by a film studio looking for assistant directors; applicants were asked to send in an essay on the basic defects of Japanese films and how to remedy them. He replied, and—together with five hundred others—he was invited to try out further, with a screen treatment and an oral examination. Kurosawa was hired and assigned to assist an experienced director named Kajiro Yamamoto.

The details of Kurosawa's apprenticeship may be found in his 1982 book *Something Like an Autobiography*. But what strikes an outsider is that a newcomer's entry into Japanese film life, at least in those days, was organized and systematic—which is to say that the system of Japanese film training had adopted some of the tradition-conscious quality of Japanese culture generally. Kurosawa himself saw fate as well as chance at work in his choice of a career, as he revealed in *Something Like an Autobiography*:

It was chance that led me to walk along the road to P.C.L. [Photo Chemical Laboratory, later absorbed into the Toho Motion Picture Company, for which Kurosawa made thirteen films from 1943 to 1958], and, in so doing, the road to becoming a film director, yet somehow everything that I had done prior to that seemed to point to it as an inevitability. I had dabbled eagerly in painting, literature, theater, music, and other arts and stuffed my head full of all the things that come together in the art of film. Yet I had never noticed that cinema was the one field where I would be required to make full use of all I had learned. (90)

Yamamoto—himself a director of both low-budget comedies and vast war epics—soon recognized the younger man's qualities, and did much to teach and advance him during their six years of collaboration. While Kurosawa gained experience in the chief technical and production aspects of filmmaking, the core of his training under Yamamoto's guidance was in script-writing and editing. (In his autobiography,

Kurosawa fondly quoted Yamamoto's remark that "If you want to become a film director, first write scripts" [127].) Thus was born a true *auteur*, who edited or closely supervised the editing of all his films and wrote or collaborated on the scripts of most of them (in addition to writing screenplays for the films of others, beginning in 1941 for Toho and ending in 1985 with Andrei Konchalovsky's *Runaway Train*).

## Something Like a Filmography

That *auteur* made his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, in 1943, when he was thirty-three. Though in a 1964 interview in *Sight and Sound* he judged this picture to be a simple entertainment piece concerned with the judo tradition, the visual treatment of its story, through composition and montage, is innovative and exuberant. Clearly this was the work of an individual talent, even if, in Kurosawa's own estimation—as he explained to Donald Richie in the *Sight and Sound* interview—he finally discovered himself as a director only in 1948 with *Drunken Angel*. (This movie coincidentally represented his first collaboration with the actor Toshiro Mifune, who was to become a frequent protagonist in Kurosawa's *œuvre*.) By 1950, with the completion of *Rashomon* and his début in the West, he had made eleven films.

During the whole of his career, which ended in 1993 with *Madadayo*, Kurosawa made thirty motion pictures, alternating between or even combining the two principal categories in Japanese cinema: the *gendai-mono*, or drama of modern life, and the *jidai-geki*, or historical drama. As Kurosawa discussed with me in the interview "A Visit with the *Sensei* of the Cinema," *Rashomon*'s story and setting fall into the category of *jidai-geki*, but his approach to the story does not conform to the characteristics of costume drama, action adventure, or romantic period-piece common to this genre. Through the use of several fragmentary and unreliable narratives, *Rashomon* in fact is modern and inventive in its telling. Whereas *Drunken Angel*, which belongs to the genre of *gendai-mono*, has a traditional or conventional narrative, even if it does treat contemporary social issues connected with the fate of postwar Japan.

Part of the impact of these two films, of *all* of Kurosawa's films, derives from the typical Japanese practice of using the same crew or "group" on each production. Kurosawa consistently worked with the

cinematographers Takao Saito and Asakazu Nakai; the composers Fumio Hayasaka and Masaru Sato; the screenwriters Keinosuke Uegusa, Shinobu Hashimoto, and Ryuzo Kikushima; and with the art director Yoshiro Muraki. This “group” became a kind of family that extended to actors as well. Mifune and Takashi Shimura were the most prominent names of the virtual private repertory company that, through lifetime studio contracts, could survive protracted months of production on a film for the perfectionist Kurosawa by filling in, in between, with more normal four-to-eight-week shoots for other directors. Kurosawa was thus assured of getting the performance he wanted every time. Moreover, his own studio contract and consistent box-office record enabled him, until relatively late in his career, to exercise creativity never permitted lesser talents in Japan—creativity made possible by ever-increasing budgets and extended production schedules, and which included Kurosawa’s never being subjected to a project that was not of his own initiation and writing.

Such creative freedom allowed him to experiment, and one result was technical innovation. Kurosawa pioneered, for example, the use of long or extreme telephoto lenses and multiple cameras in the final battle scenes, in driving rain and splashing mud, of *The Seven Samurai*. He introduced the use of widescreen shooting to Japan with the samurai movie *Hidden Fortress*, and further experimented with long lenses on the set of *Red Beard* (1965). A firm believer in the importance of motion-picture science, Kurosawa was also the first to use Panavision and multi-track Dolby sound in Japan, in *Kagemusha*. Finally, he did breathtaking work in his first color film, *Dodeskaden* (1970), where the ground of a shantytown on top of a garbage dump turned a variety of colors—from the naturalistic to shades of expressionism and surrealism—as a result of its reaction with chemicals in the soil.

As a result of the artistic control that made possible such technical innovativeness, together with his ever-expanding international reputation, Kurosawa got the epithet “Tenno,” or “Emperor,” conferred on him. But this epithet amounts less to any autocratic manner or regal raging on Kurosawa’s part than to a popularized, reductive caricature of the film director at work. Among his peers, however—including Lindsay Anderson, Peter Brook, and Andrei Tarkovsky as well as the

Americans Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas—Kurosawa was a *sensei* of the medium, a respected mentor on the set as well as off it.

And nothing reveals the reason for this respect more than his approach to screenwriting. Since his earliest films Kurosawa had preferred not to write alone, because of the danger of one-sidedness in interpreting a major character. So, with his “team,” he always retired to a hotel or a house isolated from distractions; sitting around a table, each one wrote, then took and rewrote the others’ work. Afterwards they talked about what they had created and decided what to use. This was the first stage in an essentially *collaborative* process—the next stage of which was the careful rehearsing with the cast and the camera crew before any filming could take place.

The above facts, titles, dates, and statements—though certainly relevant—nonetheless do not convey the shape and quality of Kurosawa’s career. Like other giants in film history, he seemed to grasp every possible contributory element in his own make-up, along with the core of this (relatively) new art, and mold them all to his needs, his wants, his discoveries, his troubblings. To see a retrospective of his work, which I have done twice nearly completely, from the beginnings through *Drunken Angel* and *Rashomon* and *Ikiru* and *The Seven Samurai* to *Red Beard* and *Kagemusha* and *Ran*, is consequently to see that, like every genius, Kurosawa invented his art. Of course his work can be analyzed, and analysis can enlighten, but it can’t finally explain the result of the coalescence of all those elements, the transmutation that made him unique, imperial. (Hence Kurosawa’s imperious complaint of critical over-determination in a 1975 conversation with Joan Mellen: “I have felt that my works are more nuanced and complex, and the critics—especially the Japanese ones—have analyzed them too simplistically” [Cardullo, 142].)

Mozart himself dedicated six quartets to Haydn, from whom he had learned, but what he learned was more about being Mozart. What Kurosawa learned from his teacher Yamamoto was more about being Kurosawa, which is to use action like hues on a canvas, shaded or enriched; to establish characters swiftly; to have a sure eye for pictures that are lovely in themselves yet always advance or augment the story,

never delay or diminish it; to transform the screen before us into different shapes and depths and rivers of force, with stillness and with blaze; to make life seem to occur, but, like a true artist, to do this by showing less than would occur in real life. To be Kurosawa was also to use light and air subtly; to help your actors into the very breath of their characters; to create an environment through which a narrative can run like a stream through a landscape; to know infallibly where your camera ought to be looking and how to get it there; to create a paradoxically spare richness that grows out of dramatic juxtaposition, unforced yet forceful grouping, and a persistently *following* camera, rather than out of laid-on sumptuousness in detail or color.

Indeed, the very motion of Kurosawa's motion pictures is gratifying, particularly the complementary deployment of two fields of motion—that of the camera and the actors. This does something that only film can achieve: an unaffected yet affecting ballet in which the spectator, through the moving camera, himself participates. Kurosawa has long been celebrated for such camera movement, in the form of tracking shots. Prime examples: the woodcutter striding into the forest in *Rashomon*; the opening ride of "Macbeth" and "Banquo" in *Throne of Blood*; in *Kagemusha*, the many, many tracking shots of furiously galloping riders, flags aflutter, the sweep of which is marvelous since Kurosawa sometimes blends one shot into another going a different way.

Often the motion in this film and *Ran* is made by men only, with the camera still, as the men are hurled across our vision in strong, startling patterns. Soldiers will pour down from (say) the upper right corner of the screen diagonally while another stream moves from the middle of the left-hand edge and bends away as it meets the opposition. Such a vista turns the engagement of armies rolling away over hills into a terrible excitement. Occasionally, the pulse of motion is carried by one man alone among many still ones: early in *Kagemusha*, for example, a messenger runs frantically through an encamped army, through loafing and sleeping soldiers, bearing a message to his lord. As he plunges ahead, the men he passes come awake or start up, and in this simple strophe—the messenger's feet pounding past the resting or sleeping men—is a whole conviction of being in an army at war, with the lulls and starts of service.

Even when Kurosawa's subjects seemed slight for his abilities, as in *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) and *High and Low* (1963), there runs through most of his work a conviction of mastery that is itself exciting. It is not cinematic magic of the kind to be found in later Fellini, nor is it *Angst* made visible as in the best of Bergman; instead there is an unadorned fierceness to Kurosawa's style, steely-fingered and sure. The many beauties for the eye seem the by-product—inevitable but still a by-product—of this fierceness and the burning, ironic view behind it. Indeed, what flames in many of his films, contemporary and costume, is hatred. In *Ikiru* it is hatred of death, but in most of them it is hatred of dishonor. Like most ironists and most intelligent users of melodrama, Kurosawa was thus an idealist in deliberately thin disguise.

Asked in 1966, in an interview in *Cahiers du cinéma*, whether he considered himself a realist or a Romantic, he corroborated my view by replying, "I am at heart a sentimentalist" (Cardullo, xiv; my translation from the French). So much so that, upon accepting the 1990 Academy Award for lifetime achievement at the age of eighty, Kurosawa could remark, without false humility, that the honor came too early in his career, for he was still in the learning stages of his art. "Only through further work in cinema," he explained, "will I ever be able to come to a full understanding of this wonderful art form."

### ***The Seven Samurai* in Time**

Made in 1954, *The Seven Samurai* was shown in the United States for the first time in its original version only in 1983. This version—let's call it A—runs 208 minutes and was shown in only a few big Japanese cities. Version B, somewhat shortened, played second and third runs in Japan. Version C, which runs 160 minutes, is the one that has previously been shown in the U.S. as the "full" film, in contrast with Version D, 141 minutes, which is the one that used to be available in 16mm. I have now seen all versions except B. I've used D in film courses without feeling like a butcher, although I prefer the longer C. My trouble is, after finally seeing A, I still prefer C.

Not many would dispute that, wherever one locates it in these varying versions, *The Seven Samurai* is a masterpiece. About 125 critics around the world were invited in 1982—about the time of the release

of version A of Kurosawa's picture—by *Sight and Sound*, the British film journal, to submit a list of ten favorite films, a poll that the journal has been conducting every ten years from 1952 on. *The Seven Samurai* was on many lists, and it placed third in the cumulative tally. At least this demonstrates that, nearly thirty years after it was made, the film stood high in the world—in fact was growing in reputation: it was not on the Top Ten lists for 1962 and 1972. I don't know how many times I have seen it by now, in one version or another, but *The Seven Samurai* has always gripped me.

That is, until I saw Version A, Kurosawa's own version. (Apparently he had insufficient control over what was done to it later.) With this fullest version, the element of time entered into my consciousness as it had never done before, the time needed to build, articulate, and conclude the complex novelistic story. (And the intermission, which is necessary, didn't help.) The passage of time became a kind of counterpoint to the film itself after the first twenty minutes or so. In the past, the film had simply existed in the time it needed, as a good status or building exists in the space it needs. I can't specify all the "new" materials—even the published screenplay is not complete—but I was most aware of extension in the prologue during which the samurai are enlisted and in the sequences involving the young samurai and the disguised village girl. The wonderfully edited battle scenes also had moments that I couldn't remember having seen in other versions. It was my first viewing of *The Seven Samurai* in which I felt that a foreign sensibility and foreign cultural-dramatic expectations were distancing it slightly.

This raises the unanswerable question: What is the authentic "text" of a film? It's a question that critics and teachers have to face—or, if possible, have to avoid. I can't begin to list all the films of which incomplete or lacerated copies are the only ones in existence; and color has only increased the problem because, at least on cellulose acetate film, it deteriorates. I'd bet that 25% of the "revivals" sometimes still shown in film theaters are not exact copies of the original release prints; for the now antiquated 16mm prints, the figure could be 50%. This situation, about which I've often complained, is horrible. But does it automatically follow that the uncut version or the director's restoration of a "pre-original" version is best? Would anyone really prefer

the original seven-to-nine-hour version of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924)? I don't question that anyone would like the chance to see it once. I'm grateful for the chance to have seen Version A of *The Seven Samurai*, but must I prefer it? To come considerably down the scale, must I prefer Steven Spielberg's second, revised, and amplified version of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)?

The problem exists in other fields, as well. How many audiences have ever seen Voltimand and Cornelius in a production of *Hamlet* (1603)? How many audiences have missed them? The Cambridge classicist M. I. Finley once said the following to me: "When we read Thucydides or Lucretius or Tacitus, either in the original or in translation, it is an act of faith to believe that throughout we are reading precisely what Thucydides or Lucretius or Tacitus wrote." I myself see no way to handle the question except to face each instance as it comes, as in the case of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*: with the weight evenly distributed on both feet, with empiricism at the ready.

## ***The Seven Samurai* in Close-Up**

Let me now devote some space to fully understanding the wonderful art of probably Kurosawa's greatest film. *The Seven Samurai* is Kurosawa's greatest picture not only because it has, in spades, his characteristic sense of hugeness, motion, irony, and compassion, but also because it gives the lie to the view that Kurosawa was too "Western" to be a good Japanese director. The director Masahiro Shinoda himself characterized the films of the world into three distinct types: "European films are based upon human psychology, American films upon action and the struggles of human beings, and Japanese films upon *circumstance*. Japanese films are interested in what surrounds the human being" (Mellen, 242).

Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is such a film, one that portrays the power of circumstance over its characters' lives. The major "circumstance" in the film is this: with the invention of the gun and the development of the horse as an instrument of warfare, the samurai have been rendered obsolete as the warrior figures in Japanese society of the Sengoku period (1534-1615). Whereas it is samurai swordsmen who once would have raided a peasant village for rice and women, it is now gun-toting

bandits on horseback who do so. This places the peasants in a unique position: they can hire the masterless samurai (*ronin*) to defend them for the price of three meals a day. But it also places the peasants in a precarious position: the samurai will teach them to do something they have never done before—defend themselves to the death.

“Circumstance” has forced a new role on them, for they are farmers by nature, fighters by chance (and necessity). “Circumstance” also forces dignified samurai to go about in shabby clothing and even to chop wood for a meal; it forces them to work for the very class of people, that is, for whom they once had the most contempt. “Circumstance” even gives the gun to anyone who can pay for it (unlike the sword, which takes a master to wield it, the gun can be mastered—especially at close range—by almost anyone), and thus turns the petty thief into the roving, deadly, greedy bandit, part of a larger robber band or “army.” “Circumstance” then dictates that three guns—all the bandits have—are not enough against the fighting expertise of the samurai combined with the sheer number of peasants. The day will come, of course, when all the bandits have guns, and that day will spell the end of the samurai and the rise of law enforcement, as well as the modern military, to protect the people.

The force of circumstance is clearly at work, then, throughout *The Seven Samurai*. But the film is hardly a treatise on man’s helplessness before circumstance, his dwarfing and destruction by it. The art of this film is in man’s playing out his destiny before circumstance, at the same time as circumstance seems to engulf him. The farmers fight and die for their freedom. The samurai defend the farmers no differently than they would defend themselves: nobly and fiercely. The bandits fight to the last man, against unbeatable odds in the end, apparently forgetting that their initial objective in storming the village was chiefly to seize the farmers’ crops: it is thus their own honor and fighting ability that have become the issue. We see the ironies in the situation, but the farmers, the samurai, and the bandits do not, or they do only in passing. They *act*, and in action are exalted.

That, perhaps, is the sense in which this is truly an “action” or “epic” film: action does not occur for its own sake, or for the sake of mere spectacle; instead, it ennobles. The different protagonists act, no

matter what they think or do not think. If they are aware of “circumstance,” they ignore or forget it, and, again, *act*. The concentration, in this way, is always on the human struggle more than on the existential dilemma. What matter are the present and the human more than the historical and the circumstantial. In this sense, the human transcends the circumstantial: those dead at the hands of circumstance are not mourned (farmers, samurai) or rejoiced over (bandits) at the finish of the film; the living go on living—the farmers plant rice, the surviving samurai move on, *unhailed*—the dead are dead, as indicated in the final shot of the burial mounds. (There is *one* ceremonial burial, of the samurai Heihachi, earlier in the film, but, significantly, the human struggle interrupts it as the bandits appear *en masse* on the horizon.)

The point must be made again, for the sake of contrast: *The Seven Samurai* is a film about circumstance, or about man and his relationship, at his best, to circumstance; it is not a film about fate or fatedness. In tragedy, man acts, often imprudently if inevitably, and then later reflects on his actions, wisely. In the work of circumstance, man simply acts wisely in the face of the impudence and unpredictability of circumstance. Tragedy focuses, in a way, unnaturally on man and his deeds. It presumes the authenticity and absolute rule of “fate,” and then sets man happily against it, or against himself (in whom fate may reside, as in the expression “character is destiny”). The work of circumstance focuses, more naturally, on the vagaries of circumstance and man’s often instinctive response to them. The foolishness or intemperance is in the universe; the caution and the wiseness (but not the hubris) are in man. Man thereby assumes a more modest position as a result and, in my estimation, comes off the better for it. For circumstance is the real enemy, the real force lurking at all times in the background of our lives.

“Fate,” by contrast, is the straw man in tragedy: one often senses that it has been created or invented merely for the display of man’s vanity, his self-obsession. “Fate” seems dominant in tragedy, but man outside fate is the real star as he demands, “Look at me!” “Fate,” one could say, is something man has invented to *explain away* his own obsessions and inadequacies. Circumstance, in contradistinction, is real or tangible, and man is most often defeated by it. At his best, he meets it (the

adverse kind, that is) on equal ground, and if he does not triumph, he does not lose, either. Instead, he distinguishes himself in the fight. That is all, and that is enough. Of the three groups of characters in *The Seven Samurai*—the farmers, the samurai, and the bandits—this can be said with almost tactile sureness.

To continue this line of thought, the work of circumstance is interested not only in what surrounds the human being, as Shinoda describes it, but also in how he reacts to those surroundings under duress. Tragedy is interested in what it thinks is immutable in each human being, and the world, and how this leads to man's (noble) destruction. It is interested, in short, in man above all else, and in all his flaw. Circumstance places man more squarely in the world; "fate" pushes him back into himself. The one art looks out, the other in. The difference is between East and West, self and other. Appropriately, tragedy usually focuses on one main character; the work of circumstance, on several or many. Indeed, *The Seven Samurai* is not about the seven samurai themselves; it is about the characteristics of samurai—courage, honor, dignity—which circumstance conspires to bring out in people other than the samurai themselves. Remember, for example, that it is the farmers who first decide to fight the bandits, and only then do they think to hire samurai to help them.

Here is one salient example of the difference between Western tragedy and the Eastern "work of circumstance." Near the end of the film, circumstance presents the young woman Shino with a difficult choice. By now she is in love with the samurai initiate Katsushiro and she must either go with him, a man of a higher class, or stay behind in her native village. She chooses to stay behind. Yet, even though she loves Katsushiro, Shino makes a wise choice. She will forget him in time—in fact, she seems to forget him immediately—and marry a man of her own class. She will suffer momentarily, but prosper in the long run. Shino suppresses self for "other," in other words—for her relationship to her family, village, and the world she has known since birth.

What would have happened in a tragedy, given a similar situation? Shino and Katsushiro's relationship would have been the basis for the entire film. Shino would have been irresistibly drawn to Katsushiro and would have planned to run off with him. Her parents would have

disapproved of the relationship if they had known about it—but it is kept secret from them until the end. Shino's love for Katsushiro would have been true, yet doomed by its own very intensity and the intensity of Katsushiro's love as well, and the lovers' consequent willingness to go to any lengths to marry. Shino and Katsushiro would both end up by committing suicide, and only in this way, in sorrow, would their families, separated by class, be joined.

We are, of course, in the world of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where foolish (if sincere) and seemingly inexorable action on the part of the young protagonists leads to the wisdom of reconciliation between their long-feuding families. Romeo and Juliet choose self-fulfillment before duty to family and place, and they pay for it with their lives. To a Westerner, theirs is a noble sacrifice; to one such as Kurosawa, a senseless one—senseless, because it is the very intensity, if not compulsiveness, of Romeo's love for Juliet that causes him to kill himself upon finding her “dead.” Even as Romeo was irresistibly drawn to Juliet, despite the serious feud between their otherwise socially equal families, so too is he rashly compelled to take his own life without investigating the circumstances of her “death.” Romeo does not thereby sacrifice himself for Juliet; he sacrifices himself to his own ideal of romantic love. His suicide, in other words, is paradoxically a form of self-endorsement: if he cannot have Juliet, then no one can have him. He places himself before the other members of his family and community, and it is this absorption with himself, this retreat into self, which drives him to commit suicide when he finds Juliet's body. He is finally all alone, with no reference outside himself now that Juliet is “dead,” and therefore he fancies his own death as the only way to remain “alone” without suffering interminably. In sum, Romeo cannot think of anyone but himself, and that is what kills him, as he exhausts his powers of reason and measure.

Clearly, I am not trying to say that characters in Japanese films do not commit suicide or otherwise come to personal ruin. Think only of Shinoda's own *Double Suicide* (1969) and his *Ballad of Orin* (1978). But there is a great deal of difference between lovers' deliberately *choosing* suicide as a means of escape from society's strictures (as in these two films)—killing themselves, in a sense, because they cannot fathom

society's harsh workings and simultaneously do not wish to rend its fabric—and Romeo's killing himself (or, later, Juliet's killing *herself*) in a hysterical moment of grief, because he thinks his Juliet dead. (While the characters in a Western film such as *Elvira Madigan* [1967] do appear at first deliberately to choose suicide as a means of escaping ironbound social strictures, their deaths are so romanticized by director Bo Widerberg that this army officer and his mistress seem to kill themselves [tellingly, offscreen, as *he shoots her* and only then himself] for want of something better to do after idyllically sating their love, or out of selfish, self-indulgent fear that life outside the bounds of cozy bourgeois society will not be good enough for them.)

Romeo's and Juliet's suicides, I mean to say, are accidents. They would never have happened but for the well-intentioned, if ultimately misguided, intervention of Friar Laurence in Juliet's fate. Hers is a "tragic" accident in the sense it was inevitable that, in her all-consuming love, she would go to such extremes to be with Romeo, and in the sense that her family would not relent in its feud with the Montagues; but it is an accident nonetheless. Keep in mind that the reason for Juliet's taking the potion in the first place was to appear dead *to her family*, so that she would be buried and later freed from her tomb by Friar Laurence, to run away with Romeo. She rejects her family and city and princedom, that is, for Romeo.

Shakespeare, then, devotes a whole play to the actions of Romeo and Juliet. Kurosawa, for his part, makes the relationship of Shino and Katsushiro a small part of a work devoted to illustrating commitment to "other" before self, and to depicting sure and noble action in the face of unfavorable, even overwhelming, circumstance. Shino is one of many in *The Seven Samurai* who choose duty to "other" before self, and I think observers of the film have largely missed this aspect of it. Some of the samurai, for instance, at first resist the idea of joining up with Kambei to defend the village for two basic reasons: there is not enough monetary reward in it, and there is no honor in defending farmers. But they come around to his way of thinking, primarily because of their attraction to Kambei, their desire to ally with him, as *samurai*, and aid his cause. It is thus that the individual, vagrant samurai cohere into a single-minded fighting unit.

The young Katsushiro himself becomes Kambei's disciple, against the latter's wishes at first. Katsushiro suppresses self, that is, for devotion to a master. And the few farmers outside the village proper initially want to save just themselves, not the village as a whole; but, after some coercion, they, too, forget about self and fight for "other." The same goes for the bandits. Every one of them sacrifices self to "other," as each bandit is killed in the battle with samurai and farmers. Not one bandit runs, for fear of death at the hands of his chief. (The chief says, pointing to a dead bandit, "Remember! Every coward here will get the same treatment.") No one runs, despite one bandit's prophetic remark, "The whole thing is back to front. Now we're burnt out and hungrier than they are."

Circumstance in this way unites man: the farmers with one another, just so the samurai, just so the bandits. It "unites" man further: circumstance turns farmer into near samurai in his courage and pride in fighting to the end; and it makes the samurai farmer-like in his desire to keep the rice crop from the bandits. (For it is this crop that the samurai, too, now shares, whereas once he had been bandit-like in its seizing.) Tragedy, by contrast, divides and isolates man. The knowledge that its protagonists derive from suffering is not common knowledge; it is knowledge that can only be had from profound suffering. So the message of tragedy is that man will suffer again; the calm at the end of tragedy is therefore the calm before another storm. Man is steady and united in his facing circumstance: it draws him outside himself, and it gives him an experience common to many. Whereas he is unsettled and alone in the face of tragedy, or his own fate.

This is the message of tragedy, but beneath that message is buried a more important one, hinted at earlier in my essay: that it is precisely such excessive emphasis on the individual in the West that condemns man to further suffering. It is the total fascination and absorption with self, in other words, in art as in life, which leads to continued self-destruction. "Fate" in literature, drama, or film thus becomes almost beside the point. Individual deeds leading to isolation and suffering become almost beside the point. The point is that when man lacks a reference outside himself, when he is devoted to nothing except self-fulfillment and self-glorification or -aggrandize-

ment, he will suffer, however grandly. He will break down. And he will meet his end.

From this point of view, then, tragic heroes in the West are condemned to defeat before they ever come to life on the page, the screen, or the stage. The very way of life, or worldview, that has produced them, in turn condemns them. This is not “fate” as applied to characters in works of art (as in, “It was Oedipus’s peculiar fate to be born to Jocasta and Laius, to whom it had been foretold that their son would kill his father and marry his mother”). It is *life* as applied to Western man generally.

## Kurosawa Lives

But it is not life as seen by an Eastern man like Akira Kurosawa, who, in 1961, at the height of the Cold War and subsequent to the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb in 1956, could unfatalistically declare (*World Film Directors*, 604) that his aim as a filmmaker was “to give people strength to live and face life; to help them live more powerfully and happily.” (The threat of all-out atomic warfare forms the subject of Kurosawa’s *Record of a Living Being*, which is a literal, “circumstantial” rendition of this film’s Japanese title, whereas the fateful title of the same picture upon its release in the United States and England was *I Live in Fear*.) Around twenty years later, at the time of *Kagemusha*, he still had not capitulated to fate, even though he did say the following in *Something Like an Autobiography*: “I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic” (185). Nonetheless seeing possibilities in the medium of film, Kurosawa maintained that he “would like to be able to create hope somewhere, under certain circumstances” (*World Film Directors*, 604). He did, he does.

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*Gate of Hell* (1953), directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa

*The Seven Samurai* (1954), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*The Samurai Trilogy* (1954-56), directed by Hiroshi Inagaki

*Bloody Spear at Mount Fuji* (1955), directed by Tomu Uchida

*Throne of Blood* (1957), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*The Hidden Fortress* (1958), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*Samurai Saga* (1959), directed by Hiroshi Inagaki

*The Master Spearman* (1960), directed by Tomu Uchida

*Yojimbo* (1961), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*Harakiri* (1962), directed by Masaki Kobayashi

*Chushiringo* (1962), directed by Hiroshi Inagaki

*Sanjuro* (1962), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*The Tale of Zatoichi* (1962), directed by Kenji Misumi

*Revenge of a Kabuki Actor* (1963), directed by Kon Ichikawa

*Assassin* (1964), directed by Masahiro Shinoda

*Three Outlaw Samurai* (1964), directed by Hideo Gosha

*Samurai Assassin* (1965), directed by Kihachi Okamoto

*Red Beard* (1965), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*Sword of the Beast* (1965), directed by Hideo Gosha

*The Sword of Doom* (1966), directed by Kihachi Okamoto

*Samurai Wolf* (1966), directed by Hideo Gosha

*Samurai Rebellion* (1967), directed by Masaki Kobayashi

*Kill!* (1968), directed by Kihachi Okamoto

*Goyokin* (1969), directed by Hideo Gosha

*Red Lion* (1969), directed by Kihachi Okamoto

*Machibuse: Incident at Blood Pass* (1970), directed by Hiroshi Inagaki

*Lady Snowblood* (1973), directed by Toshiya Fujita

*Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart in the Land of Demons* (1973), directed by Kenji Misumi

*The Shogun's Samurai* (1978), directed by Kinji Fukasaku

*Kagemusha* (1980), directed by Akira Kurosawa

*Legend of the Eight Samurai* (1983), directed by Kinji Fukasaku

*Ran* (1985), directed by Akira Kurosawa  
*Gonza the Spearman* (1986), directed by Masahiro Shinoda  
*Heaven and Earth* (1990), directed by Haruki Kadokawa  
*Samurai Fiction* (1998), directed by Hiroyuki Nakano  
*After the Rain* (1999), directed by Takashi Koizumi  
*Dora-heita* (2000), directed by Kon Ichikawa  
*The Twilight Samurai* (2002), directed by Yoji Yamada  
*When the Last Sword Is Drawn* (2002), directed by Yojiro Takita  
*The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi* (2003), directed by Takeshi Kitano  
*The Hidden Blade* (2004), directed by Yoji Yamada  
*13 Assassins* (2010), directed by Takashi Miike  
*Unforgiven* (2013), directed by Lee Sang-il



*On the Waterfront* (1954), Elia Kazan, American

## **Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront***

### **The Genesis of *On the Waterfront***

The genesis of *On the Waterfront* (1954) is nearly as fascinating as the film itself. In April of 1948 a New York dock hiring-boss was murdered; it was the second such killing in a short time. Reporter Malcolm Johnson was assigned by the now-defunct *New York Sun* to cover the story, and Johnson's initial inquiries developed into a full-scale investigation of waterfront crime. His findings were revealed in a series of twenty-four, Pulitzer Prize-winning articles called "Crime on the Waterfront," published in the *Sun* between November 8 and December 10, 1948. The exposé revealed rampant thievery, bribery, shakedowns, kickbacks, pay-offs, shylocking, and murder—all of which were costing the port of New York millions of dollars each year in lost shipping trade.

At this time, Elia Kazan, the director of *On the Waterfront*—his tenth feature of an eventual nineteen films—was among the most successful and influential directors on Broadway and in Hollywood. From his work on the Group Theatre's production of Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1937) to his direction of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (play, 1947; film, 1951) and of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Kazan had helped to shape studies of inhuman exploitation, bestial degradation, and greedy materialism, as well as to craft statements concerning moral responsibility. And, though *On the Waterfront* was self-generated, an independent film produced outside studio control, it evolved from Kazan's proven

aptitude for delivering “hard-hitting” melodramas for Twentieth Century-Fox, movies that earnestly scratched the itchy surfaces of identifiable social issues: anti-Semitism in *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), racism in *Pinky* (1949), and, more ambitiously, the nature of revolution in *Viva Zapata!* (1952). Despite his considerable reputation, however, Kazan had fallen into disfavor with many for his cooperation with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1952—in two separate appearances—during its investigations of Communist activity in the film industry.

The initial idea for a waterfront drama came from a person who had nothing to do with the finished, 1954 film. In 1949, Arthur Miller, flushed with the success of two Broadway plays (*All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*), directed his considerable talent toward the social struggle then being waged on the Brooklyn docks. His play *The Bottom of the River* was to tell the story of real-life militant trade unionist Peter Panto, who in the late 1930s tried to organize dissident longshoremen in Brooklyn’s Red Hook district. But mobsters inside the dockworkers’ union feared Panto’s rapid rise to popularity and had him killed, dumping his body into the East River. In 1951, when Miller’s script, now retitled *The Hook* (and supplemented by material from Malcolm Johnson’s newspaper articles), was finished, he contacted his colleague Kazan and suggested that they work jointly on a movie version. *The Hook* was never produced, however, due to HUAC pressure on Columbia Pictures’ studio chief Harry Cohn, who told Miller to change the villains from corrupt union officials and gangsters to evil Communists so that the movie would have a “pro-American” feel. Miller refused to do this and pulled out as screenwriter.

Arthur Miller was then replaced by Budd Schulberg. The author of the screenplay for *On the Waterfront* (as suggested, again, by Johnson’s articles) himself was an established author who had won esteem for his novel about the motion-picture business, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), and for his hard-hitting fiction exposé of the prizefighting business, *The Harder They Fall* (1947), as well as for a bestseller about two Hollywood screenwriters called *The Disenchanted* (1950). Like Kazan, Schulberg had also flirted with Communism in the 1930s and voluntarily testified before HUAC in 1951, admitting Party mem-

bership, explaining Party methods of controlling dissident members, and naming former associates.

Although the *Waterfront* project was supported by the combined expertise of Kazan and Schulberg, no Hollywood studio would finance the venture; some argued that the issues were too depressing, others that filming on location (as Kazan wished to do) would be too dangerous, still others that the HUAC-connection of the director and screenwriter would be bad for business. But just as the project began to seem unrealizable, an independent producer named Sam Spiegel accepted the challenge and financed the film (for slightly less than a million dollars), which, in keeping with the documentary nature of its source material, was filmed over thirty-six days on the streets and docks, the alleys and rooftops, of Hoboken, New Jersey, where this particular story takes place. With a singularity of purpose, *On the Waterfront* was not only to expose the corruption of the waterfront unions but also to reflect the day-to-day struggle for work and dignity among the longshoremen themselves. This the film would do through its protagonist, a slow-witted but sensitive dockworker who, through a strange brew of conscience and vengeance, emerges from the group to break the stranglehold on labor maintained by the corrupt union.

### ***On the Waterfront* in Action**

The film's narrative naturally centers on that protagonist: Terry Malloy (played by Marlon Brando, though Hoboken-born Frank Sinatra had been the first choice), a former boxer turned dockworker, who at the start becomes the unwitting pawn in the murder of a fellow longshoreman preparing to testify against gangsters who tyrannize the docks. Through an insistent, reformist priest, Father Barry (Karl Malden), Terry is slowly drawn into a moral dilemma. For his loyalties to the racketeers, led by Johnny Friendly, a.k.a. Michael J. Skelly (Lee J. Cobb, who himself testified before HUAC in 1953) and Terry's brother, Charley (Rod Steiger), have been weakened by the murder. (Schulberg derived Malden's character from that of a tough, profane-mouthed waterfront Catholic priest named Father John M. Corridan; Malloy was modeled after the whistle-blowing longshoreman Anthony DeVincenzo; and Friendly was based both on Interna-

tional Longshoremen's Association boss Michael Clemente and on the mobster Albert Anastasia, the chief executioner of Murder Incorporated, the "enforcement arm" of the Mafia in New York.) The weakening of those loyalties, combined with Terry's growing affection for Edie (Eva Marie Saint, in her first film role)—the sister of the film's first murder victim, Joey Doyle—and the persuasive tactics of Father Barry, gradually draws his allegiance away from the gangsters.

With a neo-Gothic Catholic church hovering behind him, Terry first confesses his culpability in Joey's murder to Father Barry; prodded by the priest, he next confesses to Edie Doyle (who, herself eager to uncover the identity of her brother's murderers, provokes Terry's guilt) as they wander outside the spiked iron fence that encircles the waterfront community, even as a wire-mesh cage encloses Terry's pigeons. But these private confessions give Terry little satisfaction, and Father Barry advises him that confession before a public tribunal will better serve his dock-worker "brothers." In love with Edie, manipulated by the priest, and in disfavor with the mob, Terry then undergoes the final stage of his conversion when, following the murder of another longshoreman preparing to testify before the Waterfront Crime Commission ("Kayo" Dugan), his own brother is brutally slain as a warning to him not to open his mouth. Undaunted and seeking revenge, Terry testifies against Friendly and his gang before the Crime Commission and afterwards is ostracized by friends and dockworkers alike as a "stool pigeon."

When Terry subsequently confronts Friendly and his cohorts directly, down at the docks, he is viciously beaten by them after putting up a good fight of his own. Yet, in a final effort of will, and with a handheld camera delivering his dizzy, lurching point of view—as he carries the longshoreman's hook (a suggestion of the cross Christ carried); wears a sacred cloth (the jacket previously worn by the two murdered or martyred longshoremen); bleeds about the head (a visual allusion to Christ's crown of thorns) from the beating (comparable to Christ's flagellation) he has just received; and stumbles three times (like Christ on the *via dolorosa* to his crucifixion) but is nonetheless urged on by the saintly Father Barry and the angelic Edie—Terry leads the rejuvenated flock of longshoremen back to work in an act of defiance against the racketeers.

## The Conversion of Terry Malloy

There are thus three major steps in Terry Malloy's conversion. The first segment of *On the Waterfront* exposes his associations with the corrupt gang; the second segment depicts Terry's discovery of corruption as well as the extent of his own guilt; and the final segment shows him battling for his own "rights." Each segment has a ritualized scene that summarizes its action. The "shape-up" scene in the first segment discloses the dehumanizing conditions on the docks—conditions that are fostered by union corruption. A union leader throws "brass checks" onto the ground, where longshoremen wrestle to retrieve their guarantee of one day's work. Shown separated from the central scramble here, Terry is given a "cushy" job for having set up Joey Doyle for the "knock-off."

The potency of the "shape-up" scene results from camera positioning. When Big Mac blows his whistle to call the workers, the camera stands behind him, permitting his large figure to obscure the huddled longshoremen. During the scramble for the brass checks, the camera is low to the ground, capturing the strain of facial expressions; character movement is downward, and the camera seems to press the viewer himself against the dirty dockside surface. When Edie, who has come to the "shape-up" to discover the causes of union corruption, tries to retrieve a brass check for her father, she comes into contact with Terry Malloy. He overpowers her and recovers the contested check for a friend, suggesting that muscle alone prevails on the docks. But when Terry learns that his female adversary is the sister of the young man whom he set up for the "knock-off," his conscience convinces him to surrender the brass check to her. In this way the conflict between muscle and morality in *On the Waterfront* is established.

During this encounter between Terry and Edie, the camera first frames Edie and Terry's contest in the foreground, with the longshoremen's struggle pictured in the background. When the couple's scramble gives way to moral considerations on Terry's part, the camera changes position, isolating their conversation and implicitly making a special case for these two individuals within the generally demeaning environment of the Hoboken docks. To wit: the moral position embodied by Edie alters the nature of what we see. For the scene as a whole, the camera presents the viewer with the facts of the story (and therefore

with a sense of witnessing a real event in the workers' daily lives), the filmmakers' opinion about the story (Mac and his associates have the power, while the dockworkers are oppressed and unorganized), and Terry Malloy's special relationship, as both insider and outsider, to the waterfront conditions that are depicted. Through camera positioning, then, the "shape-up" scene establishes dramatic conflicts, as well as visual motifs, that will be explored as the film progresses.

The second major step in Terry's conversion takes place in the middle of *On the Waterfront*, during a "martyrdom" scene in a ship's hold that features Father Barry's oration over the dead body of "Kayo" Dugan (whose character, as played by Pat Henning, was based on that of a disciple of Father Corridan named Arthur Browne). During this ritualized segment, the "waterfront priest" pleads with the dockworkers to come forward and speak because their silence only serves the mobsters' selfish interests. Father Barry's emotional words introduce the idea of shared guilt and encourage action to combat and ultimately defeat the corrupt mob. As his shrill accusations resound through the ship's hold, the forces of chaos and brutality (the "mugs" who throw cans and tomatoes at the priest) are silenced when Terry punches out the hoodlum Tillio. With the camera searching high overhead to find Friendly and Charley, it is obvious at this point that the power relationships have not yet changed. But the men begin to realize in the "martyrdom" scene that their silence only serves their oppressors.

While Father Barry speaks here, the shadow of a cross-like form rises on the wall behind him. After his speech, Dugan's body ascends on a sling from the workers' hell (the lower depths of the ship), accompanied by the priest and "Pop" Doyle (Joey's father), two saintly escorts for the workingman's martyr. The men stand with their hats off, unified at least momentarily by this ritual. Whereas the "shape-up" had belittled the dockworkers, this affirmative scene "resurrects" their self-image. The action of the men at the "shape-up" was downward to the ground; during the "martyrdom," the action is upward toward the sources of oppression.

A "testimonial" scene at the hearings of the Waterfront Crime Commission makes up the third major step in Terry Malloy's moral or spiritual conversion and completes the film's structural argument.

The rule of law receives reinforcement at this point as Terry confesses to society his unwitting complicity in Joey Doyle's murder at the same time as he indicts Johnny Friendly's gang. At the end, the state's principal investigator thanks Terry profusely, explaining that his actions "have made it possible for decent people to work the docks again." In this ritualized scene, base corruption and human indignity, previously exposed in the "shape-up" and then condemned over a martyr's body, are finally made public before a tribunal that seeks to punish those responsible. In the Commission hearing room, mobsters, newspapermen, commissioners, and interested citizens all have a designated place in a tangibly ordered environment where legal processes are conducted in the open for all to see. Unlike the dank alleys and dingy asylums of waterfront criminals, the brightly lit and crowded room encourages photographers and reporters to publish what they see and hear, as investigators doggedly pursue the illegal activities of unions that do not keep accounting books or hold free elections. The demeaning competition between workers in the "shape-up" has now become a fair and open contest between equal adversaries made possible by a legal system that ensures individual rights. Totalitarian irreverence has thus been supplanted by democratic respect.

## **Visual Style, Character Development**

The filmic technique of *On the Waterfront* is as basic and effective as the narrative itself. There are no attempts at self-conscious aesthetics or pyrotechnics at the same time as there are no compromises in rendering the urban locale as anything but the concrete jungle it is. Closed or confining spaces; cramped camera angles; dark caverns; alleyways with piercing, blinding lights; laundry hanging on clotheslines that creates diagonal intrusions into what is already a restricted living space; underground passages that swallow automobiles and entrap unsuspecting denizens; and a combination of factory smoke, people's breath, trash-can fires, and damp fogginess that oppresses human emotions and obscures open vistas as well as vital perceptions—these are the visuals (orchestrated by the cinematographer Boris Kaufman in a unified palette of spectral grays) that menacingly accompany the story of *On the Waterfront* as it takes us into the cargo holds of ships, the slum dwellings of workers,

the shack that serves as headquarters for the corrupt union leaders, the riverside piers, the seedy bars, the littered streets, even the rooftops of apartment buildings, with Manhattan looming in the background like an exotic foreign land beyond the longshoremen's reach. Everything about the film is thus grimy and oppressive (including the casting of the real-life former heavyweight boxers Abe Simon, Tony Galento, and Tami Mauriello as Johnny Friendly's bodyguards-cum-goons), with the waterfront presented as a harsh place where the strong prey upon the weak and a self-defeating code of silence or "D and D" ("Deaf and Dumb") prevails. We see and hear the subhuman malaise of this milieu, and we feel the suffering of the dockworkers as they mull about, daily, in what can only be called a species of fraternal hopelessness.

At the beginning of *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy not only is mired in this urban jungle of greed, deceit, and betrayal, but, barely articulate and thoroughly unschooled, he is also at a loss to understand it. Painfully confused about himself and his situation, he can only utter to Edie, over a drink, "Wanna know my philosophy of life? Do it to him before he does it to you." Yet beneath his layered exterior of toughness, Terry possesses traits that seem contradictory to his own philosophy: his fondness for the vulnerable yet "free," high-flying pigeons he raises in a rooftop coop; the tender way in a park he tries on, in place of a boxing glove, Edie's glove (one element in the film's "poetry of things," as opposed to words), as if he were "trying out" her superior moral values; the rejection he feels at being excluded from the confidence and protection of his older brother, together with whom he was raised in an orphanage after the death of their father (apparently himself a criminal).

As Brando interprets him, moreover, Terry Malloy also possesses an air of sadness. He is a man who, at one point, had the opportunity to rise above his condition through his skill as a prizefighter. Although he could have gained a sense of self-respect and self-worth as a contender for the middleweight boxing title, he was prevented from doing so by others—namely, Johnny Friendly and his crowd, including Charley Malloy—who made him take a "dive" so the mobsters could win big by betting on his opponent. Embittered but unself-pitying, Terry reveals his self-awareness ("I coulda been a con-

tender") in a touching and justly famous scene with his brother in the back seat of a taxicab. Although well suppressed, then, the seed of something better resides in Terry. Left to himself, it is likely that he would have remained just another likeable but expendable dock-worker and errand boy. But it is Edie's love that nurtures the seed of something better in Terry Malloy, that redeems him through love from the limitations of his own background.

Reduced in this way to its basics, *On the Waterfront* is a morality tale about how corruption can, indeed must, be fought and defeated when a man of courage and conscience emerges from the crowd to oppose the corruption. Although the narrative progresses in a linear manner without flashbacks and subplots, the film possesses a power that is announced from the opening scene, with its assertive orchestral percussion (from the musical score by Leonard Bernstein), in which Terry is dispatched to lure Joey Doyle into the set-up that will result in his murder. That power enabled *On the Waterfront* to dominate the Academy Awards of 1954 (it won Oscars for Best Motion Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, Best Supporting Actress, Best Black-and-White Art Direction/Set Decoration, Best Black-and-White Cinematography, and Best Film Editing, as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Score of a Dramatic or Comic Picture and three Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actor); it brought credibility to the Method technique of acting taught at the Actors' Studio; and it certified the acting credentials of a number of talents trained for the theater, not least of which was Marlon Brando.

Even though *On the Waterfront* today is universally hailed as a milestone in film history, the picture's dénouement still taints its reputation as a classic. In publicly informing before a congressional committee on those who have exploited him and his fellow longshoremen, Terry Malloy is elevated to heroic proportions through an action that is typically classified—by both this film and society—as reprehensible. Although, on account of his public testimony, Terry is at first considered an outcast by everyone from the police assigned to protect him down to his neighbors (who refuse to speak to him), after he confronts Friendly he becomes the waterfront's lone pillar of strength—and one who immediately wins the support of all the other longshoremen.

The fact that, through the act of informing, Terry moves, perhaps too conveniently, from being a complex individual to becoming an emblem of Christian integrity and suffering—this fact has aggravated certain viewers over the years. It seems even to aggravate Terry: the “thesis” of evil (Johnny Friendly and criminal greed) is confronted in the film by its “antithesis” of good (Father Barry and Christian charity), and the new “synthesis” (Terry Malloy) miraculously fuses selfishness and selflessness; but, as an individual staggering beneath the weight of his moral decisions, Terry remains unconvinced of the rightness of either extreme. His ambivalence is complemented or underscored by Leonard Bernstein’s music, whose rhythmic flourishes and haunting, melodic passages add nuance and density to the protagonist’s actions and, in general, enliven the story’s development.

### **The Music of *On the Waterfront***

The major slow themes in the Bernstein score are the “Waterfront Theme” (which opens the film, appears in segments throughout, and reappears in altered form during the final scene) and the “Edie/Love Theme” (which announces Edie’s entrances onto the waterfront stage). The two themes are played together when Terry and Edie discover the dead pigeons (killed in retaliation for his being a “stool pigeon”) on the roof, offering a musical reprise of the kiss that had momentarily united the couple—and the values they represent—in her apartment. After the kiss, after these two melodies are intertwined, Charlie’s own dead body is discovered by Terry and Edie, and it is at this point that he resolves to gain personal revenge for his brother’s murder on Johnny Friendly himself. In this way, Bernstein’s score attributes motivation to Terry’s actions: without such commentative musical statements, the causal connections between characters’ thoughts and actions might be missed.

In contrast to the two major “slow” themes, an aggressive and assertive one, the “Murder Theme,” etches an acoustic portrait of the corrupted, urban environment in *On the Waterfront*. The “Murder Theme,” marked *presto barbaro* in the sheet music, is first heard at the start as the Friendly gang emerges from its dingy waterfront shack. The three-voice fugato, with its rhythmic irregularity, creates an unsettling atmosphere and hauntingly presages Joey Doyle’s murder. Like

the “Waterfront Theme” and the “Edie/Love Theme,” the “Murder Theme” is thus attached to one of the contending factions of the narrative. The violent and unscrupulous mobsters are identified with the murder theme; the spiritual and incorruptible Edie is associated with the love theme; and the setting in which these two antithetical forces collide is represented by the waterfront theme.

Atmospheric unity, like that gained from Boris Kaufman’s misty black-and-white cinematography (in his first American feature film) and Richard Day’s dreary sets, is communicated in the music through a fourth, independent “Snap Theme.” Even though this active, agitated, even disturbing passage is the most pervasive musical theme in the picture, it is not used to comment on the characters or the plot. This unique combination of melody and rhythm is heard, for example, during the attack on the basement church meeting called by Father Barry; later it is given a honky-tonk rendering for the saloon scene. The “Snap Theme” is also played rapidly during the fight scene between Terry and Johnny Friendly, with a slower rendition heard after the fight when Terry is discovered lying half in the water. Such an added musical touch, with its complex metric pattern, accents the dramatic peaks—and valleys—of the narrative and, through the atmosphere it creates, contributes to the overall aesthetic unity of *On the Waterfront* as well as the characterological coherence of its protagonist.

### ***On the Waterfront and the Critics, or Genre, Metaphor, and Meaning***

Some have argued, however, that the film’s very attention to the individual moral struggles of Terry Malloy, as accentuated by Bernstein’s musical score, weakened its depiction of waterfront corruption. According to this view, *On the Waterfront*’s concentration on a singular dominating character brought close to the camera’s eye, and rendered triumphant in a seemingly optimistic ending, made it aesthetically inconvenient—if not impossible—to set Terry’s story in its proper social and historical context, the actual conditions that created the corrupt, oppressive system down at the docks. (For example, how did the shipping rackets come to power? How did they become so effective? Apart from the longshoremen, with whom exactly did the waterfront rack-

eteers deal and why?) So much did this appear to be the case that the critic-become-filmmaker Lindsay Anderson was moved to describe the film's violent conclusion as "implicitly (if unconsciously) fascist" (128), as the ignorant and befuddled longshoremen transferred loyalties so easily from one oppressor (Johnny Friendly) to another potential oppressor (Terry Malloy) without experiencing any sense of their own liberation.

From the point of view of others, the film's structural argument exposes demeaning labor conditions, blames corrupt individuals for the failure of an approved institutional structure—a union—to improve those conditions, and suggests a legal solution to the problem of worker exploitation by both unions and employers. Yet, for these critics, *On the Waterfront* tacks on an ambivalent ending that, with its suggestion of continued corruption (in the person of the unnamed and unaccused but twice-seen "Mr. Upstairs" [an allusion to either millionaire financier William McCormick or New York mayor William O'Dwyer], Johnny Friendly's superior, who remains in power at the end if Friendly does not), posits the idea that the oppression of workers is inherent in the capitalist system. Thus the film becomes a curious mixture of assertions favoring social reform and suggestions as to the ultimate futility of such reforms (not to speak of its contradictory mixture of altruistic Christian allegory and revenge-minded fantasy)—a combination *film noir* and social-problem picture, as it were. Bernstein's closing musical passages themselves accentuate the tenuous nature of the reformer Malloy's victory, as they avoid a strong, tonic cadence that would imply a stable resolution and substitute instead a dissonant tone combined with a staccato rhythm.

Still other critics have cited the parallels to Elia Kazan and Budd Schulberg's political situation outside the film and have objected not only to *On the Waterfront*'s ending as an unconvincing metaphorical effort to vindicate their own informing to HUAC, but also to the whole film's making of mobster control over the waterfront analogous to Communist Party control over the individual. (In the play *The Crucible* [1953], incidentally—an apparent study of witchcraft in Puritan Massachusetts—Arthur Miller himself tried to link the seventeenth-century Salem witch-hunts with McCarthyist Red-baiting, to explore the connection between equally hysterical and oppressive

responses to individual acts of conscience, conviction, or resistance.) Whatever interpretation one prefers, it is worth noting that in writing the novelization of his screenplay for the movie, Schulberg chose to end it not with Terry's heroic rise to leadership but with his ignoble death (similar to Peter Panto's): he is stabbed twenty-seven times with an ice pick, only then to have his body deposited in a barrel of lime in a New Jersey swamp.

A few critics have even attacked *On the Waterfront* for not being the boxing movie it could have been. According to this argument, *On the Waterfront* has nearly every ingredient of the traditional boxing picture—except the main ingredient, boxing itself. Certainly Marlon Brando's character is filled with all the romance associated with such memorable screen pugilists as Richard Barthelmess in *The Patent Leather Kid* (1927), Wallace Beery in *The Champ* (1931), William Holden in *Golden Boy* (1939), James Cagney in *City for Conquest* (1940), John Garfield in *Body and Soul* (1947), Robert Ryan in *The Set-Up* (1949), Kirk Douglas in *Champion* (1949), Paul Newman in *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* (1976), even Max Baer in person in *The Prizefighter and the Lady* (1933). Though their apparent subject is physical punishment, moreover, boxing movies have always been about the ordeals and humiliations that lead to spiritual redemption—just like *On the Waterfront*. For the boxing critics of Kazan's film, the fact that its best-known scene is the one between Brando and Rod Steiger in the taxi, where the brothers discuss Terry's aborted fighting career, speaks for itself. (It speaks in other pictures, as well: the untraditional boxing film *Raging Bull* [1980], for one, in which the Jake LaMotta character sits before a mirror at the very end and recites all of Malloy's "I coulda been a contender" speech.)

Despite the criticisms *On the Waterfront* has received since its first showing in July of 1954, the dramatic power of the film—and of Brando's central performance—endures, undiminished. Whether one sees it, finally, as a moral tale, a semi-documentary crime melodrama, a social-problem picture, a boxing film *manqué*, a Christian allegory, a political allegory, or a revenge fantasy, *On the Waterfront* has found its way into the ranks of cinema classics—where it remains, sixty-five years after its initial release.

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## **Filmography: Key Hollywood Social-Problem Pictures of the 1940s and 1950s**

*The Lost Weekend* (1945), directed by Billy Wilder  
*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), directed by William Wyler  
*Crossfire* (1947), directed by Edward Dmytryk  
*Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), directed by Elia Kazan  
*Body and Soul* (1947), directed by Robert Rossen  
*Boomerang!* (1947), directed by Elia Kazan  
*Kiss of Death* (1947), directed by Henry Hathaway  
*Brute Force* (1947), directed by Jules Dassin  
*The Naked City* (1948), directed by Jules Dassin  
*The Snake Pit* (1948), directed by Anatole Litvak  
*Force of Evil* (1948), directed by Abraham Polonsky  
*Pinky* (1949), directed by Elia Kazan  
*Knock on Any Door* (1949), directed by Nicholas Ray  
*Lost Boundaries* (1949), directed by Alfred L. Werker  
*Home of the Brave* (1949), directed by Mark Robson  
*Intruder in the Dust* (1949), directed by Clarence Brown  
*The Set-Up* (1949), directed by Robert Wise  
*The Men* (1950), directed by Fred Zinnemann  
*The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), directed by John Huston  
*The Lawless* (1950), directed by Joseph Losey  
*On the Waterfront* (1954), directed by Elia Kazan  
*The Defiant Ones* (1958), directed by Stanley Kramer



*Room at the Top* (1959), Jack Clayton, British

## **Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top***

### **British Social Realism, “New Cinema,” and Angry Young Men**

The working class has been a major subject of British art since the mid-1950s, when novelists such as John Braine and Alan Sillitoe, together with dramatists like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, began treating anti-Establishment themes in a style that can be accurately characterized as “social realism.” Soon social realism crossed over into film, where it became known as “New Cinema,” a movement whose ethos or social commitment was borrowed from Italian neorealism; whose own techniques were modeled upon those of the French New Wave; and whose scripts were often adaptations of plays and novels by blue-collar writers. I’m thinking especially of Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1959), based on the novel by Braine, Tony Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger* (1959), from the play by Osborne, and Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), a version of the Sillitoe novel.

Social-realist art in Britain was the product of the “Angry Young Men”—angry at a society that had educated them above their class origins yet had inevitably failed to provide sufficient opportunities for them in so small a country as England; and angry at a government that had improved the living and working conditions of the proletariat but had done nothing to remove class barriers, had in fact locked those barriers more firmly in place by giving the workers what they wanted,

to a point. Witness, in addition to the works cited above, such films as Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), from a Sillitoe story, as well as this director's *A Taste of Honey* (1961), from the play by Shelagh Delaney; Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963), from the novel by David Storey; and Bryan Forbes and Guy Green's *The Angry Silence* (1960).

The United States produced its own class of angry young men during the 1930s, led by Clifford Odets and represented by the workers' theatre movement, but American anger at the plight of the underclass (as opposed to the exclusively black underclass) has largely disappeared from art, primarily because, after World War II, America's blue-collar workers became *de facto* members of the middle class as wages and standards of living rose; even those workers who haven't benefited materially tend to identify with those who have. And American films reflect this state of affairs: with the possible exception of an occasional fiction film such as *Northern Lights* (1979) or *Matewan* (1987) and the documentaries of someone like Barbara Kopple, American workers tend to be featured in heroic, solidarity-promoting plots that will culminate in their common betterment (for example, Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* [1954] and Martin Ritt's *Norma Rae* [1979]), or they find themselves successfully struggling to become their own boss, to run their own business and thus shed the title of mere "worker," in such films as *An American Romance* (1944) and *Mac* (1992).

British workers, by contrast, continue to be the subject of unsentimental, unglorified tales that depict their hostility toward the ruling-class Establishment, their disillusionment with the Welfare State, and often their own narrow-minded, cynical resistance to change, which is as much the result of a misplaced pride as it is of a moral poverty bred of isolation, hopelessness, and improvidence. These workers persist in being the subject of narrative, dramatic, and cinematic art (by such filmmakers as Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, and Terence Davies) for two simple reasons: a blooded working class continues to subsist in England and, like the blooded aristocracy in that country, it tenaciously defines itself by accent, occupation, and attitude; and British artists' anger at the plight of the

underclass—an anger that first expressed itself in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century under the banner of naturalism—has not subsided.

When the plight of that underclass is depicted on film, something happens that will be vital to my discussion, and that happens in all films. To wit: by placing a working-class life on screen, the cinema automatically makes that life fascinating for having been so framed; and by thus attracting our interest in a proletarian protagonist, film confers a kind of importance on him, on a lower-echelon person to whom we wouldn't normally give second thought in real life. (Film in this way holds a special, intriguing power over us: the power to engage simply by the act of isolating and framing, by embodying images.) Some novels attempt to do the same, of course, but I would argue that they are not as successful as films because in a book a working-class protagonist remains an abstraction, a composite of words. The pleasure we take in paying rapt attention to, and caring a lot about, such a person *on film* (or, to a slightly lesser extent, in the theater, if the worker's story were to be adapted to the stage) is naturally as damning as it is astonishing.

### ***Room at the Top, Melodrama, and Tragedy***

My subject here is *Room at the Top*, partly because it was unique among British social-realist films in its depiction of upward mobility as opposed to social immobilization. (For a critical attack on *Room at the Top* as somehow representative of the acclaimed British "New Wave," see Palmer; and see both Hill and Walker for a description of Joe Lampton as a morally repulsive, unfair representative of the working class.) But *Room at the Top* was also unique in its choice of genre—a choice intimately related to the issue of a character's rise and fall. At least five critics (Houston, 58; Manvell, 43-44; Garbicz & Klinowski, 402; Gaston, 10; and Sinyard, 57) have written that the film of *Room at the Top* leans toward melodrama, particularly from the moment the industrialist, Mr. Brown, offers the protagonist Joe Lampton his daughter, Susan, in marriage. According to this view, the "evil," greedy Joe agrees to the marriage, which then causes his "good," abandoned lover, Alice, to get so drunk that she kills her-

self in a car accident. I want to go against this reading of the film, and I want to do so primarily through an investigation of Joe's behavior at several crucial moments in the action.

I shall consider only the film of *Room at the Top*, not John Braine's 1957 novel of the same title on which it is based, because the film version is, in my view, better than the original at the same time as it is essentially true to its source. Neil Paterson's screenplay, of which Braine approved, strengthens the storyline of the novel through the rearrangement of some incidents, the cutting of others, and the development of still others and of certain characters, Susan in particular. In other words, the film heightens the *drama*, the interaction and clash of character, in the story; it pares the plot down to the essentials while it keeps, and enhances, the detail and atmosphere of the novel's locations in England's industrial north simply by photographing them. (Clayton, the cameraman Freddie Francis, and the art director Ralph Brinton all had a hand in choosing the evocative locations.)

Before receiving Mr. Brown's offer of marriage to his daughter over lunch at the exclusive "Conservative Club" of Warnley (in Yorkshire), Joe Lampton had declared his love for Alice Aisgill during a weekend at the coast. She is a Frenchwoman of obscure origins—perhaps from a working-class background similar to his (she tells him early in their relationship that he reminds her of a boy she once knew)—who is married to an upper-class Englishman; Alice is thus, like Joe, an outsider in Warnley. Upon returning home from the coast for work (in the city's Treasury Department), Joe was confronted by her husband, George, with the latter's knowledge of the illicit affair. George tells him that he will not grant Alice a divorce and that Joe must never see her again. If he does not comply, George declares that he will drag him into court, which will break Joe financially and cause both his and Alice's names to be smeared in the local newspaper. In addition, Alice's husband says that he will withhold support from his wife, so that it will become impossible for her and Joe to remain together, for they will be completely destitute.

When he meets with Mr. Brown, therefore, Joe is in a somewhat desperate situation: he knows that he does not love Susan—chasing her had been more fun than "having" her—and that he loves Alice

but may not be able to remain with her. Mr. Brown at first offers Joe a proposition to set him up in business and make him a rich man in exchange for leaving Susan alone. Mr. Brown is testing Joe here, but he also means what he says. Joe is presented, in other words, with a way out of his desperate situation: if he gives up Susan for good, which he wants to do anyway, her father will buy him his own accounting firm, the income from which will enable Joe to fight George Aisgill in court and take Alice away from him. (If she does not love her husband, neither does George love her; he holds on to her out of spite.)

Out of pride, out of a desire not to be manipulated in such a way by a member of the moneyed class—not out of love for Susan—Joe refuses her father's first offer, despite Mr. Brown's threat to ruin him if he does not accept. Impressed with Joe's show of character and with what appears to be his love for Susan, Mr. Brown then offers him both his daughter in marriage and a top job in the Brown family business, provided that he never see Alice Aisgill again. Mr. Brown also reveals that Susan is pregnant by Joe. Himself once a member of the working class, the father has been testing this working-class young man's suitability for marriage. Had Joe taken the accounting firm in return for leaving Susan, Mr. Brown would have let him go. But ironically, at the same time as Joe shows his British “pluck” by refusing Mr. Brown's first offer, he traps himself. He is now confronted with the choice, on the one hand, of a good job in the Brown firm and Susan as a wife, whom he cannot betray for Alice and whom he will not be able to cheat on with other women very easily; and, on the other hand, Joe is confronted with the choice of remaining in his job as an accountant for the city and risking everything by continuing to see Alice in the face of George Aisgill's warnings not to do so.

Joe's pride—his belief in himself as the equal of his so-called “bettters”—his consequent desire to love and be loved by one of them, and in addition his desire to share, through marriage, the upper class's power and fortune, had in the first place caused him to seek Susan's favor upon his arrival in Warnley from his dreary hometown of Dufton (in Gloucestershire). Now Joe's pride has placed him in a terrible dilemma: either he weds Susan and lives comfortably if miserably, or he refuses to marry her and attempts against all odds

to win Alice as his wife. And one can be certain that if Joe refuses Mr. Brown's second offer, the latter will ensure that George Aisgill succeeds in his attempts to ruin Joe and Alice, whom Susan's father calls an old whore. As Mr. Brown says, he can fix just about anything.

Joe no longer has the choice of giving up Susan in return for his own accounting business, since her father now believes that Joe loves his daughter; if he suddenly disillusioned Mr. Brown by rejecting Susan for an "old whore" and still asks to be set up with his own firm, he will be refused and will have provoked Mr. Brown to support George Aisgill against him and Alice. Joe knows this and therefore chooses Susan and a job in the Brown business, but he needs a double Scotch in order to do so. Later he courageously decides to tell Alice of his decision in person rather than writing her a letter, as Susan suggests. That, during their meeting, Joe says to Alice over and over again, "*I'm going to marry Susan!*" seems to me to indicate more that he is talking himself into this decision than that he is declaring his mind made up.

So, far from veering toward melodrama at the end, *Room at the Top* moves into tragedy. Joe is no villain who gets what he wants at some poor woman's expense. His spiritual life, awakened by his love for Alice, began its descent once he gave up his love for her and is over the moment she dies in the automobile crash. The film suggests as much in the office scene at Town Hall and its aftermath. Amidst congratulations from the secretaries and his fellow workers on his impending marriage to Susan and his appointment to the Brown firm, Joe overhears a conversation in which Alice's death is reported. He then smashes his champagne-filled glass to the floor and hastily exits, winding up late that night at a working-class pub where he gets thoroughly drunk in the company of a local girl. Her jealous boyfriend and some of his cohorts later viciously beat Joe up, then throw him into a dirty canal whose surface reflects the neon sign of one of Mr. Brown's factories. Joe's descent is complete—for the moment, physically as well as spiritually. His spirit will remain in the gutter, despite the place he will soon take at the top through marriage to Susan. Correctly, he blames himself for Alice's death; just as correctly, if you will, he has chosen unhappy marriage with Susan over bankruptcy and disgrace for himself and Alice at George Aisgill's hands.

## Genre, Class, and the Critics

Related to the issue of tragedy versus melodrama, Penelope Houston posed the following question, without answering it, at the time of *Room at the Top*'s British release: "Is [Joe] the victim of his own character, or of a social system which has formed him and given him bitterness?" (57). Joe is the victim of his own character *and* of the English social system; his tragedy is at once of his and his society's making. The pride that makes it impossible for him to accept Mr. Brown's offer of an accounting firm, in return for leaving Susan alone, was born, not in a vacuum and not to every working-class man in England, but of the resentment Joe in particular felt as a member of the oppressed laboring class in his native Dufton as well as in the Royal Air Force (where, he reports, officers bossed him about). In other words, *he* felt the resentment, even bitterness, and his society supplied the discrimination that made him feel so.

When *Room at the Top* was released in America, Robert Hatch wrote that "the film repeatedly suggests that there is something important about Joe Lampton, but what it is never comes clear" (395). Philip Hartung echoed Hatch with the line, "I'm not sure that Joe Lampton is worth all this attention" (22). Joe would argue, as he does in the film, that he is "working class and proud of it"; that is, that he is important by virtue of *his*, and by extension the film's, belief in his own importance, in his special humanity. His tragedy is that he remains working class at heart at the same time as he assumes the manners and dress of, first the middle class, then the upper class; he remains working class in his pride, one could say. Further, Joe's tragedy is that, not satisfied with his sense of self-importance as the son of working-class parents who gave their lives during the war and as the subsequent ward of a loving aunt and uncle, he strives to become important to people like the Browns.

The great irony is that at the moment he becomes "important" through marriage into the Brown family, Joe has ceased to be of importance to us. At the moment he reaches the top, he has in fact reached the bottom. Joe hesitates a long time before uttering a tepid "I do" during the wedding ceremony that will formally admit him to the top. It is as if he is completely aware of the finality of the "sen-

tence" he is imposing on himself and wants to extend his freedom just a few more moments before losing it. His hesitation here is the externalization of the hesitation he inwardly felt at his decision to wed Susan in the first place, and which he tried to dispel by affirming again and again, "*I'm going to marry Susan!*" The tears Joe sheds in the car as he and his bride are driven away from the church are thus for himself as well as for Alice. Seemingly encapsulated in the limousine, alone in spirit if not in body, Joe sees nothing but deserted road ahead as we watch the open road quickly disappear behind him through the rear window.

The inevitability of Joe's fall is partly contained within his own character, which, as I have indicated, was formed by his experience during the war as well as by his life of poverty and social humiliation in Dufton. The war gave Joe a taste of freedom, a kind of holiday from class restrictions. According to the director of *Room at the Top*, Jack Clayton, "Holidays abroad for the English . . . prior to 1939 were basically for rich people. But in the war there was this enormous flowing population, going all over the world, having totally new experiences" (Gow, 13). The war also fueled Joe's feelings of resentment toward the upper class, represented by his haughty, sneering superior officers in the Royal Air Force. He admits that he did not try to break out during his three years in a German prisoner-of-war camp, unlike Susan's suitor Jack Wales, an officer who was successful in his escape attempt. Joe's pride caused him to wait out the war in prison; he preferred detainment in one place by the Nazis to a kind of subjugation all over Europe by British officers.

On account of his pride, in other words, Joe chose to "entrap" himself in a German jail. Similarly, after experiencing the freedom of a larger, more variegated town like Warnley, he traps himself in marriage to Susan as the result of his pride, after refusing Mr. Brown's first offer—to set him up in business in return for leaving Susan alone—during lunch at the Warnley "Conservative Club." Just as Joe did not want to be ordered about willfully and contemptuously by Royal Air Force officers, he does not wish to be pressured to do something, for a price, by the commanding Mr. Brown.

## The Visual Style of *Room at the Top*

The inevitability of Joe's fall is reflected in *Room at the Top*'s visual style. Even as he is ostensibly enjoying his relative economic and social freedom in classier, "cosmopolitan" Warnley, the camera is "trapping" Joe the whole time through tight framing in restrictive settings. He lives in very cramped quarters, just as he did in Dufton: when he visits his aunt and uncle there, the scene is confined to one dark, dreary room whose low-hanging ceiling presses down on the characters. When Joe gets on the bus for work in Warnley with his fellow employee and housemate Charles Soames and has to stand, not only does the camera cut him off just below the waist, but many other passengers crowd around as well, hemming him in.

The camera also presses in on Joe when he telephones Susan after his return from Dufton, only to be told by her mother that she is vacationing in the south of France. We get a close-up of his face here, less to emphasize his emotional state than to stress his confinement, in character if not ultimately in career, within the working-class world of his origins; indeed, this close-up is harshly juxtaposed against the full-body shot of Mrs. Brown answering her telephone in a spacious living room. Ironically, Joe is exultant after this call, declaring to Charles that the Browns are falling into his trap, that by removing their daughter from his sight they are only increasing her fondness for him. Joe barely has space to express his happiness in this scene, since the low walls and angled ceiling of his attic room seem to be collapsing in on him.

The camera's tight framing of Joe Lampton continues during his love scenes with Alice. Naturally, when they are so framed in bed, their intimacy is underlined. But when the lovers are photographed sometimes from the neck up, at other times from the waist up, as they walk about their trysting place (the tiny apartment of Alice's friend, Elspeth) during an argument, something other than intimacy clearly is being indicated. The camera is cutting them off, limiting their already limited space, and thereby suggesting that the world closing in on them. At issue here, significantly, is Joe's pride, which has flared up in response to Alice's revelation that she had once posed nude for a photographer. Just as he was too proud to be subjugated by Royal Air Force officers during the war and will later be too proud to capitulate

to Mr. Brown by accepting his offer of an accounting firm in return for breaking off with Susan, Joe is too proud to submit, in a manner of speaking, to all the men who are “having” Alice (through nude photographs) at the same time as he has her—and “having” her younger, more voluptuous self at that. So upset is he at Alice’s revelation that he ends the affair, only to reunite with her after his conquest of Susan. It is after they get back together that they sojourn on the coast, where, after it stops raining and they can leave their small cottage, they still seem confined: as they walk on the beach in the middle distance, the piles of a pier frame them on either side in the foreground.

## **The Reactionary and the Revolutionary, or the Bottom and the Top**

Let me be clear: I do not think *Room at the Top* argues that Joe Lampton should have stuck to his own people, as his uncle advises him to do; that he should have been happy to live among the working class of Dufton at the same time as his accountant’s salary enabled him to live above them, so to speak. (At one point during the movie, in order to get Joe away from Susan, Mr. Brown arranges a very good job for him back in Dufton, which Joe refuses when he learns who is responsible for it.) *Room at the Top* is not reactionary, is not a cautionary tale; and neither is it revolutionary. The film does not emphasize the class struggle, as Peter Cowie maintains (224). It does not give, in Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren’s words, human form to social protest through the character of Joe Lampton (306).

Joe knows that he is any man’s equal, if not his better. He comes to Warnley with the city accountant’s job in hand, so “equal opportunity” is not an issue in the film. As Stanley Kauffmann has written, in his pursuit of Susan, Joe “yearns for power, not equality” (21), yearns to join the upper class, not dismantle it. Joe is out for himself, not for the class of his origin; he is out to avenge past wrongs done to *him*, to get what is coming to *him*. His alienation from the working class becomes clear when, back in Dufton for the job interview Mr. Brown has secretly set up, he returns to his boyhood home, which is now a bomb site. When he tries to be friendly to the mother of a little girl with whom he had been talking and tells the woman that he used to

live next to her house, she dismisses him as a total stranger and slams the door in his face.

For better or worse, then, the social classes are in place in *Room at the Top* and on the evidence will remain in place, *have* remained so. The issue is not the proletarian revolution, on the one hand, or the preservation of the class system, on the other, but Joe Lampton's attempt to rise through the classes. The film is timeless, not timely; its subject is a complex human being, not an oversimplified sociopolitical cause. Paradoxically, Joe's working-class pride drove him to educate himself out of the working class, then compelled him to try to get a piece of the upper class. Tragically, the pride that enabled him to endure years of poverty and social humiliation is the same pride that undoes him spiritually in the end. In a sense, the class of his origin finally has its revenge on him for leaving it, while he proves that class is no barrier to someone with strength, ability, and determination.

Of course, Joe pays a great price in order to prove his point—he “wastes” Alice Aisgill. She may be the “tragic waste” of this story, but one could argue that in killing herself she has also “killed” Joe and thus had her revenge on him, too. In short, far from cheapening its action by resolving it through melodrama, *Room at the Top* enriches that action throughout by consistently suggesting its tragic underpinnings. There are no black-and-white characters in the film, no heroes or villains, no defeat of the guilty and reward of the innocent: each of the central characters wins, and each one loses. Put another way, that’s life.

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## **Filmography: Key Works of British Social Realism**

*Room at the Top* (1959), directed by Jack Clayton

*Look Back in Anger* (1959), directed by Tony Richardson

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), directed by Karel Reisz

*The Entertainer* (1960), directed by Tony Richardson

*The Angry Silence* (1960), directed by Guy Green

*A Taste of Honey* (1961), directed by Tony Richardson

*A Kind of Loving* (1962), directed by John Schlesinger

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), directed by Tony Richardson

*Billy Liar* (1963), directed by John Schlesinger

*The L-Shaped Room* (1963), directed by Bryan Forbes  
*This Sporting Life* (1963), directed by Lindsay Anderson  
*The Leather Boys* (1964), directed by Sidney J. Furie  
*Morgan* (1966), directed by Karel Reisz  
*Charlie Bubbles* (1967), directed by Albert Finney  
*If . . .* (1969), directed by Lindsay Anderson



*Sundays and Cybèle* (1962), Serge Bourguignon, French

## **Serge Bourguignon's *Sundays and Cybèle***

### **Love and the Spirit, or *Sundays and Sentiment***

Prominent in the poetry of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance was a manifestation of one of the profoundest changes in human thinking: the spiritualization of man's attitude toward women. In the poetry of Dante, for a prime example, physical desire was transformed into an earthly image of heavenly love; true love still struck through the eye ("love at first sight"), but it reached to the soul and thereby created a hunger for spiritual rather than fleshly beauty, for romance rather than sex. The sight of Dante's Beatrice (whose name, of course, means "blessed"), in other words, drove out all foul thoughts, her presence ennobled, and her discourse was an aid to salvation. This Neo-Platonic optics of love was explained in such works as the *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium"* (1468), by Marsilio Ficino, and *The Philosophy of Love* (1502), by Leone Ebreo; yet such absolute love, we've since learned, is clearly the kind that can be maintained over a long period of time only from a distance or in death.

In any event, thus did lust become the love we all know, and that love, either in whole or in part, is the subject of a "classic" film I recently re-reviewed. This picture, *Sundays and Cybèle* (1962), points up the distinction, not only between sexual gratification and divine fulfillment, but also between what the French *auteur* Jean Cocteau once called cinema and "cinematograph" (Evans, 45). Nowadays, as the Hollywood "product" more and more crowds out American independents as well

as European, Asian, and African imports, it pays (if that is the word) to remember this distinction. Cinema, Cocteau, said, conceives of film as an art and is as rare as genuine art (or genuine religiosity, for that matter) always is; while “cinematograph”—literally, a motion-picture camera or projector, or the material of moviemaking as opposed to its spirit—concerns itself with commercial entertainment produced by an industry and anathematizes art (though sometimes falling into artiness, the arch impostor or devil incarnate). It is the familiar business we see in all our pleasure palaces known today as cineplexes.

No example of the vainglories and inconsequences of cinematograph, *Sundays and Cybèle* might be accused by the inattentive of being an instance of sentimentality. (The great critic I. A. Richards once remarked that you could characterize an era of history according to a certain choice between anxieties: Were people more worried about being thought sentimental or stupid?) But the line that divides the honesty of sentiment from the falseness of sentimentality—yet another distinction—is always an exceedingly thin one, far too thin for the gross vision of most moviemakers, or moviegoers, to be able to detect. That the French-made *Sundays and Cybèle* is full of the most affecting sentiment, yet never crosses the line that leads to the sentimental, is a tribute to its director Serge Bourguignon (born 1928) and to its cast, yet I am not sure that the audience which applauded this picture (at the revival house where I saw it) was aware of the difference between the two. As I watched, I became aware that there was a great deal of what could only be called low-level activity taking place around me: lots of tongue-clucking, dabbing at the eyes, and lugubrious sighing of the sort you’d expect at the resuscitation of an early Judy Garland or Jackie Cooper movie. And the talk I heard outside the screening room only reinforced my suspicion that the general response to the film continues to be to its easier, more superficial aspects.

*Sundays and Cybèle*, in other words, is not sentimental, but the reaction to it is pretty heavily so. This doesn’t really matter, for the picture has outlasted those audiences in search of a good cry, or at least has found the sensitive and appreciative audience it deserves. Indeed, it has taken its place as one of the most profoundly moving and original of cinematic achievements, if not as one of the truly epochal masterpieces

of screen history. Masterpieces, after all, are few and far between, and may not be summoned by journalistic fiat; in any case, a movie as rare as *Sundays and Cybèle* is rare enough for us to be indulgent with its faults. Serge Bourguignon never rid himself of those faults (more on which later) in his subsequent films—*The Reward* (1965), *Two Weeks in September* (1967), and *The Picasso Summer* (1969)—which is why most people have never heard of him.

## First Feature, First Response

But his first feature film created an international sensation in the autumn of 1962. This was due in part to the unusual circumstances of its release, and in part to its potentially scandalous subject, a love story—albeit a platonic one—between a thirty-year-old man and a twelve-year-old girl. Bourguignon had studied painting and sculpture before attending the IDHEC film school (L’Institut des hautes études cinématographiques) in Paris. After graduating, he made a number of documentary films shot in exotic locations, one of which, *The Smile*, about a Buddhist monk, won the short film Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1960.

For his first feature, he loosely adapted a 1958 novel by Bernard Eschassériaux called *Les dimanches de Ville-d’Avray*. It was first screened in early September 1962 at the Venice Film Festival, where, though not in the main competition, it received a rapturous reception and a special mention by the jury, as well as the Prix Maschere. There followed a world premiere in New York in mid-November—even though the film still had no distributor in France. American critics adored *Sundays and Cybèle*, which earned the supreme accolade of “masterpiece” from *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther, along with the Oscar for best foreign-language film in 1963. American enthusiasm for the film quickly led to French distribution later that November. As Bourguignon recounted in a *Cahiers du cinéma* interview in January 1965: “Two days after the premiere in New York and the buzz around the film, five Parisian theaters wanted to show it that had previously turned it down.”

In contrast to the international excitement, the reception in France was distinctly more nuanced. Although some critics waxed lyrical about the poetry of the images, the tasteful treatment of the subject, and the performances Bourguignon elicited from his

actors, there were dissenting voices and a few quite vicious attacks, often around the same subjects. This was in line with the deeply divided positions typical of the New Wave era critical climate. Where some saw visual poetry, others talked of mannerism; what for some was sensitivity was for others preciousness; and the cultured aura of the film, including its use of classical music, was in certain quarters considered pretentious. Contributing to the film's notoriety was an acrimonious exchange in the press between Bourguignon and Eschassériaux. The novelist resented derogatory remarks about his book by some critics, who compared it to a *série noire* novel, and he felt his contribution to the film's success had been marginalized. Such arguments may appear remote over fifty years later, yet, beyond battles over authorship and critical score settling, they remain relevant if only as a symptom of the deeply disquieting effect the film has on the spectator.

What is so impressive, however, about *Sundays and Cybèle* is that besides the risk it takes of appearing sentimental, it also takes the risk of seeming perverse, its theme being open to all sorts of vile misconstruction. The mutual love of a thirty-year-old man and a twelve-year-old girl is just the kind of subject that is likely to set prurient (as well as puritanical) minds operating at full speed; there are bound to be any number of viewers, especially today, who instantly murmur to themselves, "Ah yes, Lolita," and sit back waiting for the titillation to begin. The extent of their disappointment is the measure of the purity and innocence of this remarkable story, which adamantly refuses to be bent to base interpretations or responses.

## **Sunday Story**

The narrative unfolds in Ville-d'Avray, a residential suburb of Paris near Versailles. Its central figure is a young man who had been a fighter pilot during the war (the French involvement in Indochina), had crashed, and suffered total amnesia as a result—or so the military thinks. But his amnesia, tellingly, is in reality the result of his having killed a young Vietnamese girl during a "routine" strafing mission. He is now living a tortured life of emptiness and lack of connection. There is a young woman, Madeleine—his nurse while he was hospi-

talized—with whom he lives and who cares for him, but she cannot break through the opaque wall that separates this traumatized man from his past and from existence in the present. The ex-flyer so completely lacks confidence in life and in himself that when his mistress tells him how madly she loves him, and how much she wishes to marry and “lead a moral life,” he appears almost doltishly impassive. But he is shell-shocked in addition to having lost his memory, and in a sense he thus becomes a metaphor for the vacuous sterility and ideological disillusionment of the French nation in the wake not only of its Nazi occupation-cum-collaboration during World War II, but also of its subsequent moral-military debacles in Algeria as well as Vietnam.

One night at a train station (where this transient of the mind spends much of his time) he encounters a little girl, who is being taken by her father from their home in Paris to a Catholic orphanage in the town; the man is clearly fleeing his responsibility, while his daughter is frightened and unhappy. “She must not cry,” the former flyer tells the startled parent, and his need to put an end to her tears, to do something toward reducing all the pain and sorrow in the world, as well as to move toward some kind of true relationship with another human being, is the springboard for the remainder of this film’s slender action. Not by accident, that action occurs on Sundays, during which the would-be father takes his girl away from the orphanage for a few hours, on idyllic walks around lakes and through woods in Corot’s own Ville-d’Avray landscape.

The first time he calls for her, he pretends to the nuns that he is her father and to the girl that her biological parent (who in fact has fled the country) sent him. Very soon, however, the girl realizes that her real father has deserted her and pleads with the injured pilot to keep her with him. He is not able to do so, but he promises that he will keep up the paternal pretense and come for her every Sunday (though he never informs his mistress of these outings). Swiftly they build up a relationship of complete trust and affection, a fantasy world such as children fashion—full of secrets, promises, and bounteousness to come. And in the course of their Sabbaths together, both child and man poignantly, passionately (though chastely) renew their faith in life and themselves, as each feeds on the other’s need to love.

“When I am eighteen, I will marry you,” the girl tells this amnesiac, and he smiles with as much innocence as hers. Yet, while their relationship is innocent, it is also complex and sophisticated; she enjoys teasing him and even playing the coquette, while they are both driven on occasion to the doubts and jealousies of conventional lovers. But what these two mean to each other far transcends any conventional love story—or any sentimental fable of an attachment between two lost souls. In their direct and childlike love there is bodied forth the agony of loneliness, of loneliness, and the need to overcome it that attaches to us all. There is something greater than this as well: the suggestion (particularly daring in the early 1960s) that our categories of love are far too narrow, that even on the natural, earthly level there is something like a mystical body or union of which we are all mortal members.

In time the inevitable misunderstanding of the world moves to crush this unprecedented occurrence, or to prevent the inconceivable from happening. In the woods on Christmas Eve, where the two are celebrating the girl’s “first real Nativity,” society, which has gotten wind of this couple’s friendship, arrives to protect itself against what it cannot comprehend. The flyer and the girl have already exchanged presents: hers to him is her real name (the nuns had renamed her Françoise), which she has never revealed but now writes on a scrap of paper that she puts inside a tiny box—her way of presenting him with her fate and fullness of being. (Cybèle may be the goddess of nature, or the archetypal earth mother, in ancient Greek mythology, but one’s “name day”—particularly in European countries—is the day on which one is baptized or the feast day of the saint after whom one is named; and that day for Cybèle in effect becomes Christmas, which is apt here given what I have suggested is the mystical union of this male and female.)

The man, whose own name is Pierre, gives the little girl the weathercock from the local church, having overcome his worst, physical fear—an ironic one for a former pilot, that of ascending heights—in order to get her something she admired, or to secure himself in her affections (no fickle weathercock, he), as well as to confirm for himself the progress of his emotional recovery under her direction. (Obediently following Cybèle in ritualistic play-therapy, Pierre asserts early

in their friendship, “You will be my healer.”) And there in the woods, while he watches over her sleeping form, the police come and kill the “dangerous maniac,” killing as well, in their great folly, the spirit of the girl whom he loved. We last see her crying inconsolably, now that she has lost not only her name, but also the one person ever to show her genuine kindness and love. And now that, metaphorically speaking, France has rid itself of one more reminder of its martial and political folly, its collective subconscious guilt.

## **Children, Adults, and Pedophiles**

While “pedophilia” itself is never explicitly referred to in *Sundays and Cybèle*, to the spectator of today, it is a constant subtext, present throughout the film in a manner that is both pervasive and oblique. Part of this ambiguity comes from our different awareness of the issue today, and part from the process of adaptation. Bourguignon removed the novel’s explicit references to pedophilia in Pierre’s murky past; he also deleted the criminal environment surrounding Pierre. What he retained quite faithfully, on the other hand, was the central relationship between Pierre and Cybèle. This is portrayed, as it is in the novel, as innocent and natural, a perspective that critics at the time endorsed nearly unanimously, writing of the “pure” love of the protagonists. (In fact, this term was bandied about so often that it began to sound like denial.) *Sundays and Cybèle* is keen to emphasize the notion of a harmless and guilt-free bond between the two characters.

First, Pierre and Cybèle are presented as children; Bourguignon, indeed, called his film “the story of childhood recovered and childhood preserved” (Vincendeau, 87). Pierre, despite being an adult, is depicted as a benign, dreamy, and innocent figure—another significant difference from the book, in which he is capable of brutal violence. Second, Pierre and Cybèle’s encounters take place mainly around the beautiful woods of Ville-d’Avray and its string of lakes, and much is made of the links between Cybèle and nature, starting with her name, as well as the couple’s pronounced love of trees and water, repeatedly underlined by both dialogue and cinematography. Third, the film explains Pierre’s actions in a way that diminishes his responsibility. The opening of the film, composed of documentary footage of warfare in

southeast Asia, shows his trauma to be war-induced rather than the result of the criminal violence of the novel; a shot of the young Vietnamese girl's terrorized face tells us that he is about to kill her, and thus casts the relationship with Cybèle as expiation for his war crime. Finally, the construction of point of view contributes to making the bond between Pierre and Cybèle acceptable. While the spectator witnesses the platonic nature of their relationship, and the saintly Madeleine and the artistic Carlos, Pierre's sculptor friend, are consistently supportive, disapproval comes from highly unsympathetic outsiders who mock or taunt Pierre. As a result, even when he briefly turns violent at one point, we sympathize with him as a victim of persecution.

The film convincingly absolves Pierre because he is, deep down, a "child." More difficult to accept is the way that it makes Cybèle a mini-adult. Patricia Gozzi was twelve years old when she made the film, and physically looks her age. Yet her strangely sophisticated talk transforms her into a child-woman. In addition to her repeated "I love you's" and stated wish to marry Pierre when she is eighteen, the film skews the register of her dialogue away from a child's language, with such literary phrases as "*Au fond tu es un enfant perdu*" (Deep down, you are a lost child) or the coquettish tone of such sentences as "*Pierre, est-ce que tu serais jaloux?*" (Pierre, would you by any chance be jealous?), which it is hard to imagine coming from a twelve-year-old. In this respect, critic Françoise Giroud may have had a point when she wondered in *L'Express*, at the time of the film's release, whether the necessary concision of the English subtitles had indirectly helped the film's wider reception in the U.S.

The film, in any case, subtly projects onto Cybèle a disturbing view of adult womanhood. At one point, Pierre is told that Cybèle is ill, and he finds her in the orphanage infirmary. There, she sulks and then vents her anger at having seen him with Madeleine, and the speech of a jealous woman in a child's mouth creates a jarring effect. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the only critic of 1962 to pick up on this view of femininity was Giroud, one of the few women to write about the film. As she noted in *L'Express*, "The slightest word pronounced by the little girl betrays a possessive, castrating will—visible even more clearly in the mistress" (Vincendeau, 87). Pierre thus is not just the prisoner of his own post-traumatic mental state (poetically evoked when we see

him in one of Carlos's beautiful cages) but also of controlling women; against this background, his recourse to phallic symbols makes more sense (stealing a dagger and then the cockerel-shaped weathervane from the church's spire).

Indeed, though at first the film seems to be about Pierre, in a sense it is really about Madeleine and Cybèle, their profound love for him, and the strange competition between them. As he is not fully adult, the mature, self-sacrificing love that Madeleine offers becomes repulsive to Pierre. Yet the twilight world of Cybèle's precocity—a world filled with latent sexuality but where no real consummation is ever possible—draws him irresistibly. (In Greek mythology, love of the goddess Cybèle itself demanded the transmutation of erotic drives: her male devotees emasculated themselves to achieve ecstatic unity with her.)

*Sundays and Cybèle*, finally, is testimony to the historical determinants of film reception. Whereas most people at the time saw a struggle between the innocent world of childhood and cynical, sordid “society,” today we may be more inclined to see an adult abusing his power to seduce a child bereft of fatherly love, however innocent his intentions. Put another way, is Pierre, as Madeleine’s closest friend suggests, innocently playing at a marvelous, infantile game? Or is he a passionate psychotic, as a psychiatrist implies, intent upon working through his traumatic wartime guilt by destroying Cybèle? Is Cybèle herself a true or artificial muse? Has she really led Pierre out of the neurosis that held him prisoner? We long, then, to hold *someone* responsible for what is happening, for what will happen, but because we do not fully comprehend Pierre’s psychology—his ultimately inscrutable mental imbalance—there can be no accountability. The power of the film lies, not in answers to the above questions, but in what happens, on a purely emotional level, to the two women who love Pierre. That is, we have perceived the nature of Pierre’s love through too many eyes to admit of right and wrong, or yes and no.

## Film Style, Acting Method

Rather than believe in the innocence or guilt of Pierre’s intentions toward Cybèle, then, we are moved by her vulnerability as her father abandons her; and we feel compassion for Madeleine as

she spies on Pierre and Cybèle walking through the woods hand in hand. One reason for the emotional power of the film, aside from our feelings for Cybèle or Madeleine, is undoubtedly Hardy Krüger's performance. Against the odds, his naturalistic acting style and youthful good looks render him an attractive character, while his slight German accent elegantly emphasizes his "otherness." Another reason is the way Bourguignon embeds the encounters between Pierre and Cybèle in a poetic evocation of the natural environment of Ville-d'Avray, splendidly served by Henri Decaë's cinematography. Similar to his beautiful wintry landscapes in Jean-Pierre Melville's *The Silence of the Sea* (1949), the film that made both director and cinematographer famous, Decaë's elegiac views of the lakes and woods of Ville-d'Avray in *Sundays and Cybèle* justify the implicit comparison with Corot's paintings of the same area (which one character mentions).

Such flaws as there are in *Sundays and Cybèle* stem from its periodic lack of trust in its own substantial nature as a work of art; at such times as the film becomes arty, Decaë's camera turns coy, bathing scenes in a mistiness that is supposed to suggest mystery if not to make us misty-eyed, or shooting for no intrinsic reason through keyholes, shutters, and leaves. It could be argued, however, that since Bourguignon's film announces with its preliminary "outburst"—the scene of Pierre's plane, on its strafing mission, plummeting groundward toward the Vietnamese girl frozen with fear—the theme of traumatic vertigo with its accompanying dislocation of this Frenchman's perspective, these shots may not be so extrinsic after all, particularly when they involve Pierre's own point of view. Bourguignon thus uses his camera to show us scenes through the hazy distortions of his protagonist's vision: we experience his vertigo at a rippling pond and the too-high trees there; we see the electric cars careening in an amusement park through his eyes.

Indeed, throughout *Sundays and Cybèle* we must experience the world in terms other than our own. In one scene (when we follow Pierre's desperate race to the orphanage) that world bounces madly by us in the rear-view mirror of a truck. At a restaurant party, a babbling couple is grotesquely distorted through the stem of Pierre's champagne

glass. He and Cybèle stand, hand in hand, by a lake at one point. The camera moves backward and we see their reflections in the water. They move away, yet their backs come towards us. The camera inverts, the lake becomes the land. But to dissect the scene in this manner as we watch is to shatter the subtle imagery that Bourguignon invokes. If instead, we suspend our critical faculties—sit back and let ourselves be “fooled” again and again—we may enter into manifold perceptions of the world. Bourguignon has thus frustrated our predisposition toward a melodramatic, good vs. bad orientation—particularly apposite in a film that broaches the subject of pedophilia—because, through the interdependent use of sound, photography, and skillful editing, he offers a perpetual shifting of perspective.

In any event, the picture quite survives its moments of self-conscious aesthetics or, if one wishes to be unkind, cinematic trickery. This is not only because of Decaë's otherwise appositely stark black-and-white cinematography (where there is no room for the “gray area” of an unconventional romantic relationship). Decaë's cinematography here also connects the film, however loosely, to the French New Wave. Decaë worked on such New Wave classics as Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (*Handsome Serge*, 1958) and François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), among others—films also notable for the beauty of their sober yet lyrical black-and-white photography. Histories of the New Wave do not, on the whole, consider *Sundays and Cybèle* as part of the movement, and opinions at the time were equivocal.

### ***Sundays and Cybèle, the French New Wave, and After***

The *London Times* of December 30, 1962, for example, mentioned *Sundays and Cybèle* alongside such other titles from that year as Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*), Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, and Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*. Similarly, the aforementioned piece in *Cahiers du cinéma* in January 1965 included Bourguignon in its roundup of retrospective interviews with the new generation of French directors. At the same time, other reviewers praised Bourguignon for not making a New Wave film. While extensive use of location shooting, elliptical narration, and a “modern” subject link *Sundays and Cybèle* to the New Wave, its female lead is far from the sensual and ro-

mantic women played by the likes of Jeanne Moreau, Jean Seberg, and Anna Karina. And with his traumatic link with the past, Pierre is some distance from the hedonistic figures of modernity embodied by Jean-Paul Belmondo, for instance.

Moreover, Bourguignon's subsequent trajectory sharply diverged from those of Truffaut, Godard, Alain Resnais, Éric Rohmer, Varda, et al., all of whom forged long and successful careers. The international triumph of *Sundays and Cybèle* led to approaches from Hollywood, but his two films there were not a success, despite their evident originality. *The Reward*, an international coproduction starring Max von Sydow, has garnered a cult following as a *noir* western but is generally thought of as a failure. *The Picasso Summer* is an even greater oddity. Based on a short story by Ray Bradbury, it concerns a self-doubting artist (Albert Finney) who takes his wife (Yvette Mimieux) to the south of France in search of Picasso. *The Picasso Summer* mixes live-action scenes with vivid animation of Picasso works. But the production was riddled with conflicts, notably between Bourguignon and Bradbury, leading to some of Bourguignon's live-action scenes being reshot by Robert Sallin. While the film is worth rediscovering, at the time, it ended Bourguignon's career as a director. (In between these two American films, he returned to France to make one of Brigitte Bardot's late films, *Two Weeks in September*.)

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that *Sundays and Cybèle* sank from view, only to resurface in an era when its subject is likely to provoke unease, even as the film elicits admiration for its aesthetics and touching performances. Yet this strange, melancholy, and beautiful film deserves to be seen again, not, like Bourguignon's subsequent films, as a curiosity, but as an original and brave attempt at putting on-screen some of the most complex and difficult human feelings.

## **Actor-Auteur, Writer-Director**

That attempt succeeds in large part because of the splendid work of the movie's central performers: Krüger (still professionally active today as an octogenarian) as the man and especially Gozzi as the girl. If there were no other reasons to see *Sundays and Cybèle*, Gozzi, who here gives a performance of unusual depth and range, would be

a compelling one. She plays Cybèle with astonishing insight, with the seeming understanding of a mature woman. She is beyond any doubt the most sensitive and beautiful pre-teen in the history of the screen (having stopped acting at age twenty), making a once-famous child star like Patty Duke seem about as authentic and winning as a television commercial for McDonald's. But, then again, the film itself makes most Hollywood movies look like the creations of ad men at Big Mac's.

To move from acting to writing, Serge Bourguignon co-scripted *Sundays and Cybèle* (with Antoine Todal). And I connect the quality of this film, in no small measure, to the fact that it was wholly or partly written by its director. This may seem a Romantic notion on my part (even after fifty years of *auteur* theory), the chimerical idea in so collaborative a medium as film of the director as higher, shaping, and unifying consciousness, as individual artist-genius apart from the madding, ignoble crowd. But, then again, such a Romantic notion is especially apt as applied to a picture that itself is implicitly or explicitly about romance—conceived, that is, as an idealized love affair between two human beings (maybe even one) and the mind, or camera-eye, of God.

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## Filmography I: Key French Children's Pictures

*Poil de carotte* (*Carrot-top*, a.k.a. *The Red Head*, 1925/1932), directed by Julien Duvivier

*Zero for Conduct* (1933), directed by Jean Vigo

*La Maternelle* (*Children of Montmartre*, 1932), directed by Jean Benêt-Lévy

*Portrait of Innocence* (1941), directed by Louis Daquin

*Forbidden Games* (1952), directed by René Clément

*The Red Balloon* (1956), directed by Albert Lamorisse

*The 400 Blows* (1959), directed by François Truffaut

*Zazie in the Metro* (1960), directed by Louis Malle

*Sundays and Cybèle* (1962), directed by Serge Bourguignon

*Mouchette* (1967), directed by Robert Bresson

*Naked Childhood* (1968), directed by Maurice Pialat

*Hoa-Binh* (1970), directed by Raoul Coutard

*The Wild Child* (1970), directed by François Truffaut

*Murmur of the Heart* (1971), directed by Louis Malle

*Small Change* (1976), directed by François Truffaut

*Au revoir les enfants* (*Goodbye, Children*, 1987), directed by Louis Malle

*Ponette* (1996), directed by Jacques Doillon

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## **Filmography II: Key Works about Pedophiles or Pedophilia**

*The Young One* (1960), directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Lolita* (1962), directed by Stanley Kubrick  
*This Special Friendship* (1964), directed by Jean Delannoy  
*The Naked Kiss* (1964), directed by Samuel Fuller  
*Death in Venice* (1971), directed by Luchino Visconti  
*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini  
*Sweet Movie* (1974), directed by Dušan Makavejev  
*Pretty Baby* (1978), directed by Louis Malle  
*Garde à vue (The Grilling)*, 1981, directed by Claude Miller  
*In a Glass Cage* (1986), directed by Agustí Villaronga  
*Lolita* (1997), directed by Adrian Lyne  
*Happiness* (1998), directed by Todd Solondz  
*The Pledge* (2001), directed by Sean Penn  
*Fat Girl* (2001), directed by Catherine Breillat  
*Lilya 4-Ever* (2001), directed by Lukas Moodysson  
*Mystic River* (2003), directed by Clint Eastwood  
*The Woodsman* (2004), directed by Nicole Kassell  
*Bad Education* (2004), directed by Pedro Almodóvar  
*Little Children* (2006), directed by Todd Field  
*Doubt* (2008), directed by John Patrick Shanley  
*Michael* (2011), directed by Markus Schleinzer  
*The Captive* (2014), directed by Atom Egoyan  
*Spotlight* (2015), directed by Tom McCarthy

## **Filmography III: Key Works of the French New Wave**

*La Pointe Courte* (1955), directed by Agnès Varda  
*Bob le flambeur (Bob the Gambler*, 1956), directed by Jean-Pierre Melville  
*Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), directed by Louis Malle  
*Le Beau Serge (Handsome Serge*, 1958), directed by Claude Chabrol  
*Hiroshima, mon amour (Hiroshima, My Love*, 1959), directed by Alain Resnais  
*The 400 Blows* (1959), directed by François Truffaut  
*The Sign of Leo* (1959), directed by Éric Rohmer

*Les Cousins* (*The Cousins*, 1959), directed by Claude Chabrol  
*Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), directed by François Truffaut  
*Les Bonnes femmes* (*The Good-Time Girls*, 1960), directed by Claude Chabrol  
*Le Petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier*, 1960), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Breathless* (1960), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Paris Belongs to Us* (1961), directed by Jacques Rivette  
*Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), directed by Alain Resnais  
*Adieu Philippine* (1962), directed by Jacques Rozier  
*Jules and Jim* (1962), directed by François Truffaut  
*Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), directed by Agnès Varda  
*My Life to Live* (1962), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*La Jetée* (*The Pier*, 1962), directed by Chris Marker  
*Les Carabiniers* (*The Carabineers*, 1963), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Contempt* (1963), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Band of Outsiders* (1964), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Alphaville* (1965), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*Weekend* (1967), directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
*L'Amour fou* (*Mad Love*, 1968), directed by Jacques Rivette  
*My Night at Maud's* (1969), directed by Éric Rohmer  
*Claire's Knee* (1970), directed by Éric Rohmer  
*The Mother and the Whore* (1973), directed by Jean Eustache  
*Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974), directed by Jacques Rivette





*Closely Watched Trains* (1966), Jiří Menzel, Czech

## Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains*

### Czech Renaissance

In the late 1960s, when Czechoslovakian films burst upon the West, they seemed something of a miracle. They were small in scale. They were typically about ordinary, unglamorous people who were generally regarded with a humorous and humane eye. They were also different in tone from other national cinemas that had earlier caught our attention—Italian neorealism, for example, or the French New Wave. There was a wryness about the Czech pictures, a gently stated sense of the absurd, which reminded us that the country's national epic was—uniquely—a comic one, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1923).

We were frequently told that *Schweik*'s sly subversions of the warrior mentality represented the best that a small, geopolitically unfavored nation could offer in the way of resistance to its surrounding bullies, and we were glad to see that the work of a new generation of filmmakers—their attitudes formed during the Nazi occupation of World War II, then sharpened by the Stalinist dictatorship of the post-war period—confirmed the comic novel's continuing relevance. The portrait of Czechoslovakia we pieced together from its films of the sixties was of what we might now call a slacker nirvana, a place where private problems always took precedence over public issues, and where ideological pomp was ever subverted by the imp of the perverse.

There was something delightfully casual about the manner of these Czech films, too. Loosely structured, often shot in the streets and on

provincial back roads, frequently acted by amateurs, the lack of formality in them seemed all the more remarkable since they were, after all, the products of an Iron Curtain country. Perhaps its rulers were not as sternly censorious as those of the other middle-European Stalinist regimes, but still . . . Prague Spring or not, Alexander Dubček or not (Dubček came to power in 1968 with plans to present “socialism with a human face” [Bischof, xi, 5, *et passim*] through reform and liberalization [hence the brief “springtime”]), we wondered how the chief figures of this cinematic renaissance—Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, and Jiří Menzel, all graduates of FAMU (Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts), the famous state film school—got away with it. (Other directors of the Czechoslovak New Wave, also known as the Czech Renaissance, include František Vláčil, Pavel Juráček, Jaroslav Papoušek, Otakar Vávra, Zbyněk Bryných, and Vojtěch Jasný, as well as the Slovak directors Dušan Hanák, Juraj Herz, Juraj Jakubisko, Štefan Uher, and Elo Havetta.) Mostly, though, we were simply grateful and welcoming when, at roughly the same historical moment, Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde* (1965), Passer’s *Intimate Lighting* (1965), and Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) struck us in the West with gentle, insinuating force.

## Menzel and the Movies

A 1963 graduate of FAMU, Menzel himself spent the next two years working as an actor and assistant director. His first motion picture as a director was a contribution to an anthology film titled *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), based on five short stories by Bohumil Hrabal remarkable for their concentration on the destinies of little people on the edges of society. (Evald Schorm, Jan Němec, Věra Chytilová, and Jaromíl Jireš were the other contributors, making *Pearls of the Deep* a kind of omnibus of the Czech New Wave.) Menzel’s first feature, his masterpiece *Closely Watched Trains*, is also his chief claim to a firm place in the history of Czech cinema. This picture, adapted from a Hrabal work as well, received an Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film and was also the biggest box-office success of all the New Wave works in Czechoslovakia.

As the Hrabal adaptations suggest, Menzel was influenced by Czech fiction writers rather than Western filmmakers. Except for *Crime in a*

*Nightclub* (1968), his reverential parody of American musical comedy, his films prior to the Soviet invasion of 1968 are adaptations of novels or short stories by Czech authors. These include *Capricious Summer* (1967), from a novella by Vladislav Vančura; Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains*, "The Death of Mr. Baltisberger" (segment from *Pearls of the Deep*), and *Larks on a String* (banned; released 1990); and Josef Skvorecký's *Crime at a Girls' School* (1965). The subject of all these pre-1968 pictures is sex. In a sense, Menzel's entire *oeuvre* is one continuous eulogy to sex—a subject at best tolerated at the time by Marxist aestheticians in Czechoslovakia. The "crime" in *Crime at a Girls' School*, for example, turns out to be not murder but the loss of virginity, and the "philosophical" ruminations of the three elderly Don Juans in *Capricious Summer* are directed at a young female artiste. (*The Don Juans* [2013], by the way, is the title of Menzel's most recent, and perhaps last, film.) Considering that sex has always been the most dangerous enemy of puritanical political revolutions, Menzel's message is clear.

Menzel, like many good directors outside the United States, is also co-author of his screenplays; in the case of *Closely Watched Trains*, he collaborated with the author of the novel himself to produce the final shooting script. However, the adaptation of Hrabal's prose, which is based on an uninterrupted flow of speech, on monologues in which the word (in its nicety or refinement) has enormous significance, is not a simple matter. The narrative itself of Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains* functions on several levels: ridiculous aspects of life are permeated by cruelty, tragedy, and pathos as well as affection; and time is treated freely, with the reader being led, without obvious transitions, into various depths of the past. Menzel nonetheless succeeded in transposing this multi-layered story into an art form with a visual foundation. He retained almost all the conflicts or tensions of the original narrative at the same time as he translated the action into a linear time sequence, arranging the succession of events according to his own aesthetic needs.

In the process, Menzel necessarily sacrificed a number of *hrabalesque* details that had almost begged for inclusion; not allowing himself to be seduced by Hrabal's magical lexicon, he consistently pursued a cinematic mode of expression. That mode—except in the black comedies *Crime at a Girls' School* and *Crime in a Nightclub*—is essentially

realist, and could perhaps best be described by the theories of André Bazin: Menzel, that is, reveals rather than describes or even reconstitutes reality. There is very little in his work of the formalist elements of moviemaking, and if, occasionally, there are some (as in the opening montage of *Closely Watched Trains*), they are used mainly for comic effect. Despite dropping the achronological structure of the novel from which he adapted *Closely Watched Trains* and replacing it with a linear narrative, Menzel makes inventive use of subtle symbolism in the film (e.g., the lovely old chiming clock, a vestige of bygone Habsburg glory, which at the climax almost operates as a metronome to the explosions, having bided its historical time), as well as elliptical editing, and replaces *hrabalesque* naturalism with the lyrical understatement of Jaromír Sofr's black-and-white cinematography. Such lyricism manages to poeticize the foolishness in the film, even as tenderness mitigates the farcical and a certain seriousness gives an edge to the laughter—all of this without a single lapse into sentimentality. Menzel also does excellent work with the actors, both professional and nonprofessional. (He himself plays a small part in the film, as a medical doctor.)

## Trainspotting

Born in 1938, Menzel is too young to have had much immediate reaction to the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, so *Closely Watched Trains* is a view of immediately inherited history rather than of direct experience. This combination of closeness and distance may be what gives him his cool manner here (as elsewhere in his *oeuvre*) without the loss of central compassion. The film is set in a rural railroad station in western Bohemia near the end of the Second World War. The protagonist, Miloš Hrma, is a late adolescent who goes to work in that station. The boy, played delicately by Václav Neckář, is shy, eager, awkward, naïve, and touchingly dignified. A pretty, round-cheeked girl who works as a conductress is fond of him; a masterful philanderer who serves as the station's train dispatcher uncles him; the Stationmaster benevolently tyrannizes him. He is grateful for the attention and the patronization as well as the guidance.

Despite the fact that *Closely Watched Trains* rarely strays beyond a sleepy, small-town railway station, it is rich in character and comic

incident. Given the modest volume of the station's traffic, each and every member of the its staff has plenty of time to pursue his or her interests, all of them irrelevant to the great drama—World War II—that is proceeding just up the tracks from them. Consistently nostalgic for the great days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and ever dreaming of being promoted to Chief Inspector of the railroad, the Stationmaster, for example—assisted by his wife—devotes most of his energy to raising pigeons, geese, and rabbits in the backyard. Hubička ("Little Kiss"), the train dispatcher, has a feckless air about him that belies his success as a womanizer. Passing through from time to time are the imperious local countess (an aristocratic reminder of Czechoslovakia's Austro-Hungarian past); the outraged mother of the seduced station telegraphist, Zdenička (who, in one of the film's signature moments, has her legs, thighs, and buttocks delightfully rubber-stamped by Hubička); and some Nazi soldiers intent, not on behaving as the fascist beasts of the conventional war movie, but instead on conquering a carload of nurses whose train has been sidetracked near the station.

The most significant of the station's visitors is the clueless collaborator Councilor Zedníček (played with a sort of weary menace by Vlastimil Brodský), who is in charge of making the trains—especially the "closely watched" ones (those given priority passage through Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia to carry troops, munitions, and other supplies to the German army)—run on time. A great believer in obedience, tradition, and honor, militarism, respect for authority, and hard work, he always has a large map with him and uses it to eagerly demonstrate the strategic brilliance of the latest German retreat. Moreover, many of the lines Zedníček utters sound amusingly like slogans from the Communist regime of Hrabal and Menzel's day—promises about the wonderful future lying ahead, lectures about the need for discipline, and subtle reminders of the penalty for traitorous acts. He is, of course, treated with contempt by the gang at the station. Passionate ideologues are, for them, figures not of gentle mockery but of puzzled bemusement.

The film's central figure, Trainee Miloš, is primarily the passive observer of the station-workers' little symphony of self-absorption, searching it for the clues that might help him to become a successful

adult. Since he is no Hamlet nor was he meant to be, this is not a status that we, watching him watching them, have much confidence that he will attain—especially after Miloš reveals that his grandfather was killed while trying to stave off the German advance by hypnotizing a tank, that his forty-eight-year-old father does nothing but sleep on the sofa all day and collect an ill-deserved pension, and that he himself wants to be only a train dispatcher, even in time of war, “for the simple reason that I don’t want to do anything, just like my ancestors, except stand on the platform while others have to drudge and toil.” Thus do Menzel and Hrabal announce that they intend to poke fun at one of their nation’s sacred myths, the *tragic* helplessness of the Czechs in the face of a foreign power.

At the beginning of *Closely Watched Trains*, Miloš is dressed in his new uniform. The camera moves gradually from his polished shoes up his trouser legs, then past the shining buttons on his coat to his cap, which his mother lifts ceremoniously above his head as if he were a young prince. The scene recalls the coronation of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) and Olivier’s *Richard III* (1955). However, here the grandeur of the uniform is in inverse proportion to the importance of Miloš’s job, and its use is therefore primarily ironic. Menzel’s visual style is otherwise straightforward and uncomplicated, with little camera movement and much detail packed within each frame. (Indeed, an apt alternative title for the movie might be *Closely Packed Frames*, given its relatively short running time of ninety-three minutes.) The shy Miloš himself is frequently shown near the edge of the frame, or being marshaled toward it, so that his quality of timorous onlooker is conveyed by the visual composition itself.

If *Closely Watched Trains* can be said to have a narrative through-line, it derives from Miloš’s battle with sexual impotence, which takes the form, in his case, of premature ejaculation in his attempts to bed Máša, the young conductress who has shown an interest in him. Eventually he is compelled to visit a bordello—where he goes in the end, not to employ a prostitute, but to make a typically inept attempt at suicide (after which the camera pans slowly past a poster, no doubt mounted by local collaborators, that defiantly proclaims the Soviets will never get Prague in their clutches). Phallic symbolism thus per-

vades the film, as a constant reminder of what is on Miloš's mind: the levers that he must handle while Hubička pesters him about Máša; the coffee grinder gripped between the thighs of Hubička's "cousin"; the welling mound of ticker tape as Miloš spies on Hubička and his "cousin"; the still-standing coat rack in the bombed photographic studio owned by Máša's uncle; the lone "smoke signal" among the clouds (a likeness of the earlier coat rack) at the end, signifying the explosions that have just occurred; and, finally, the gander. When Miloš consults the Stationmaster's wife about his sexual problem, she is busy force-feeding a gander, caressing and stroking its long neck at the same time. This woman has no advice for our hero, but the sight of the neck massage is nonetheless sufficient to give him an erection.

Miloš is ultimately made a man, in more ways than one, by dispatcher Hubička, who is not as feckless as he pretends to be. As Miloš's own father, a loafer, is no role model, the boy has had to choose between the Stationmaster, with his love of uniform and hypocritical disdain for moralizing, and Hubička, with his weakness for women and genuine disdain of convention. Miloš chooses Hubička's model and, ironically, discovers that there is valor beneath this man's mask of hedonism. After Miloš reveals to Hubička that he is a virgin (even as his words are drowned out by a passing train), the latter conspires with the Resistance fighter Viktoria Freie, or "Victorious Liberation," (a) to have explosives delivered to the station so that a "closely watched" train can be blown up; and (b) to have the mature, pretty Freie make a man of the tremulous Miloš. In the dark of the train-station office, on the prized leather sofa that the Stationmaster has kept from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (and that Hubička himself has sullied with his sexual activities), Miloš thus achieves overnight, and after so many years of vulnerability, a new sense of invulnerability or masculine invincibility. Which leads him to heroic martyrdom, which Menzel shoots in an almost casual manner—which, as a result, is all the more powerful in its impact.

Just before that final burst of well-staged action occurs, Councilor Zedníček appears trackside to vent his disgust with a ridiculous bureaucratic hearing (concerning who was responsible for the rubber-stamping of Zdenička's buttocks with the very official stamps he

used to indicate German strategy on his map) over which he has just presided. He's a busy man. And these Czechs, he says, are nothing more than "laughing hyenas." Well, Hubička does laugh in the end. But it is a laugh of triumph, of unlikely victory. It's a reminder that any kind of animal, especially the human animal, can be dangerous when tormented or wronged or simply not taken seriously enough. Most important, this concluding sequence turns the entire movie into a metaphor for Czechoslovakia itself. It says that a pleasant, pleasure-loving little country, so often occupied, so often preoccupied by its own survivor's *Schweik*-ishness, is more dangerous than it looks.

## Closely Observed History . . . and Art

Czechoslovakia is, after all, the country that assassinated one of the main architects of the Holocaust, Reinhard Heydrich, in World War II and endured a terrible reprisal for that act at the village of Lidice (which was razed to the ground, saw all its men and boys over the age of sixteen shot, and had all but a handful of its women and children deported to Nazi concentration camps). It is also the country that, not a year after *Closely Watched Trains* was released (and condemned in the U.S.S.R. for being insulting to the Czech Resistance), endured a terrible punishment for its cheekiness, its ironic-satiric spirit—Soviet tanks in Wenceslas Square, the re-imposition of the Iron Curtain mentality on its free and easy spirit. It is certainly easy to read the subtext of *Closely Watched Trains* as a reference to just such a Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in the filmmaker's "present," in contrast with the film's telescoped past, where the "text" of the country's Nazi occupation during the Second World War takes place.

*Closely Watched Trains* is, finally, a small *Entwicklungsroman*, or coming-of-age tale, of Miloš's passage from his mother's sheltering home into the world. If I seem to have switched themes, that effect is the quintessence of Menzel's view. He concentrates fiercely on the daily life of this boy: his job, his ambitions, his unsuccessful bedding with his girl, his worries about his manhood. The camera often vividly closes in on an object from that daily life—a pair of glasses, an old phonograph—in such a way that the thing is charged with an immanent glory that has to do, not with materialism or fetishism, but with a profoundly affectionate

reverence for the artifacts that have become human beings' companions in living. And such an emphasis on the details of everyday existence is augmented by Menzel's judiciously sparse use of trains themselves.

Few things, after all, lend themselves more readily to photographic exaggeration than trains, but here they function as a kind of wipe between sequences of the plot, and their sound becomes a *ritornello* in the music of dailiness. It is only obliquely, through understated imagery, that the Nazi occupation itself enters the film—Menzel reminds us of the war, at the outset, with a view of military transport trains—and never, really, until the end does the conflict come full center. (Its tone not so restrained as Menzel's film, Hrabal's novel features far more, and more pointed, German or anti-German commentary.) Together with the gradually increasing and terrifying reminders of war (the destruction of the photographic studio, the corpses seen on one train), there unfolds Miloš's erotic suffering.

The entire narrative is thus derived from the idea that human grief, fear, and joy have their place in times of cruel war as well as during years of profound peace. The story of young Miloš and his love life, together with the petty destinies of the other characters who work at the railroad station, is therefore linked quite factually and soberly with the overwhelming events of World War II. Menzel is acknowledging that boys have ambitions, get erections, emulate their elders, and indulge in daydreams, no matter what chief sits in the capital. He is also saying that, in an ancient country, there is an ancient schism between the peasantry and the government, whether that government is monarchical, fascist, democratic, or socialist. The peasant's first duty is to survive, despite the efforts of government to hinder or help him. And the facts of war, of whatever particular war it happens to be at the moment, are simply one more condition in his struggle. (For a similar theme, see some of the products of the New Romanian Cinema, particularly Corneliu Porumboiu's sadly funny *12:08 East of Bucharest* [2006], which shows us that, for many Romanians, the end of the Ceaușescu dictatorship in 1989 was joyous and liberating, but for many others—perhaps more—it was something that happened off in the capital or in another city while at home one kept on sweeping floors or hammering nails.)

This theme had been treated before, notably in *Two Women* (1960), the film by Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini from a 1958 novel by Alberto Moravia, but there a somewhat broader brush was used for a more traditional humanitarian approach. Menzel, much younger than the Italian partners, more tart and laconic, focuses more thoroughly on the minutiae of daily existence, edits more brusquely, and indeed sees the whole grim era from a wry, sardonic angle, bearing in mind the whole time that most films, whether they mean to or not, glamorize war in general and the Second World War in particular. The sole possible note of movie contrivance—or is it grim irony?—is that only on the night before Miloš is killed does Menzel allow him his first full sexual experience with the aptly named Viktoria Freie, the female member of the Resistance who has unwittingly brought him his death warrant. Thus, in this youth's case, what the French call “la petite mort” or the little death—the sensation of sexual orgasm as likened to death—becomes literally, lastingly realized.

In such a way, perhaps more emphatically than Menzel's other films, *Closely Watched Trains* shows its debt to surrealism by subversively equating sexual and political maturity, or sex and political self-sacrifice in the cause of freedom. The equation of sex and politics is cemented when Liszt's *Les Préludes* (1854), the signature tune used earlier in the film to accompany German radio news of victories on the Eastern front, mock-heroically accompanies Miloš's victory over his premature ejaculation. (*Les Préludes* itself was inspired by a line from Alphonse de Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques* [1820]: “What is life but a series of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is tolled by death?” [Goulding, 247]). He goes to his death the next day without any tinge of heroism on his part, moreover. Miloš is simply doing his neighborly peasant duty in the Resistance as he did his duty in his railway job: in a dramatic assertion of his newfound virility, and in his own form of close surveillance, he blows up a Nazi ammunition train, during which act he is machine-gunned to death by a German train guard. But there is a telling element of the accidental in this decisive integration of Miloš's personal story with the fight for national liberation, for he becomes a hero only by chance—when Hubička, who was supposed to bomb the train,

is suddenly detained by Councilor Zedníček for questioning in the rubber-stamping incident.

Typical of the film's understatement is the moment of Miloš's death on the signal tower. First, we see him climb the tower as Novák, the elderly station porter who heretofore has been portrayed as hopelessly lost in the past, mans the signals that slow the train down. Miloš then drops his parcel containing a time bomb onto the train, after which he is killed. We don't see him clutch himself as he is shot; there are no spasms. We hear the shots, and next we see him sprawled on top of a freight car passing beneath the tower, being borne away. There is thus no Hollywood foregrounding of the individual here; instead, the after-effects of the explosions resonate across the screen and through our own historical consciousness: this is what it took to disable the closely watched or guarded trains and the whole system that relied on their running on time. Even as Miloš's body is borne away, everything gets borne away sooner or later, the film seems to say; the question is: Is this a sufficient reason not to care? By the very selection of his theme, Menzel seemingly chooses to answer in the negative.

The director also clearly chooses in this film to alternate the comic, the obscene, and the tragic, or to deploy the humorous and the deadly serious simultaneously—as in the aftermath of Miloš's death (especially when Hubička laughs hysterically following the blowing up of the entire twenty-eight-carload train), as in the scene where Councilor Zedníček explains to the train-station employees how cunningly the German army victoriously retreats—to create a peculiar mixture of pathos and tragicomedy that epitomizes an essential characteristic of Czech New Wave cinema: the ironic and often detached intermixing of dichotomous emotional responses. As Menzel himself put it,

Film is too imperfect to be capable of recording everything that takes place in our fantasy when we read Hrabal's text. . . . It is necessary to compensate for the poetry of these imaginings. In my opinion, the poetry of this film is not the absurd situations themselves but in their juxtaposition, in the confrontation of obscenity and tragedy. (Hames, 2008: 27)

## Beyond the Rails

*Closely Watched Trains*, a far superior work to the contemporaneous Czech successes *The Shop on Main Street* (1965, dir. Ján Kadár & Elmar Klos) and *Loves of a Blonde*, is the best film from the New Wave of Czech filmmaking. Yet Menzel was banned from the Czech film industry after the Soviet invasion of 1968 and the suppression of the Prague Spring (events reworked, incidentally, in Margarethe von Trotta's German film *The Promise* [1994]), only to save his career by recanting and publicly dissociating himself from his pre-invasion films, including *Closely Watched Trains*. However, even in his humiliation he scored one important point against the political establishment: he refused to return his Oscar to Hollywood, as the authorities had demanded (he was instructed to explain that he did not accept awards from "Zionists"). Menzel merely made a "repentance" movie, *Who Looks for Gold?* (1975), a formulaic socialist-realist tale about the workers building a huge dam, and followed it up, for good measure, with the routine comedy *Seclusion Near a Forest* (1976).

Of the important figures of the Czech movie renaissance, it's worth noting, only Menzel stayed on in Prague. (Beyond him, the only name really to survive is that of Miloš Forman, whose *Firemen's Ball* [1967] is very much of a piece with the film under discussion, and who then of course went on to great success in Hollywood with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* [1975] and *Amadeus* [1984].) Although Menzel has been busy since, under the Communists and subsequently under the anti-Communists of the Czech Republic following the Velvet Revolution of 1989-92, his later work has not had an impact comparable to that of *Closely Watched Trains*. The only possible exception came in 2006 with *I Served the King of England*, another World War II picture (again from a novel by Bohumil Hrabal) that has the same deceptive light touch as Menzel's 1966 one—a lightness that partially masks the serious subject and yet explores it.

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## Filmography: Key Works of the Czech Renaissance

*The Sun in a Net* (1962), directed by Štefan Uher

*Something Different* (1963), directed by Věra Chytilová

*Black Peter* (1963), directed by Miloš Forman

*The Fifth Horseman Is Fear* (1964), directed by Zbyněk Brynych

*Diamonds of the Night* (1964), directed by Jan Němec

*Loves of a Blonde* (1965), directed by Miloš Forman

*The Shop on Main Street* (1965), directed by Ján Kadár & Elmar Klos

*Pearls of the Deep* (1965), directed by Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, Věra Chytilová, & Jaromil Jireš

*Closely Watched Trains* (1966), directed by Jiří Menzel

*Daisies* (1966), directed by Věra Chytilová

*The Firemen's Ball* (1967), directed by Miloš Forman

*The Joke* (1968), directed by Jaromil Jireš

*Deserters and Pilgrims* (1968), directed by Juraj Jakubisko

*All My Good Countrymen* (1968), directed by Vojtěch Jasný

*The Gala in the Botanical Garden* (1969), directed by Elo Havetta

*The Cremator* (1969), directed by Juraj Herz

*Birds, Orphans, and Fools* (1969), directed by Juraj Jakubisko

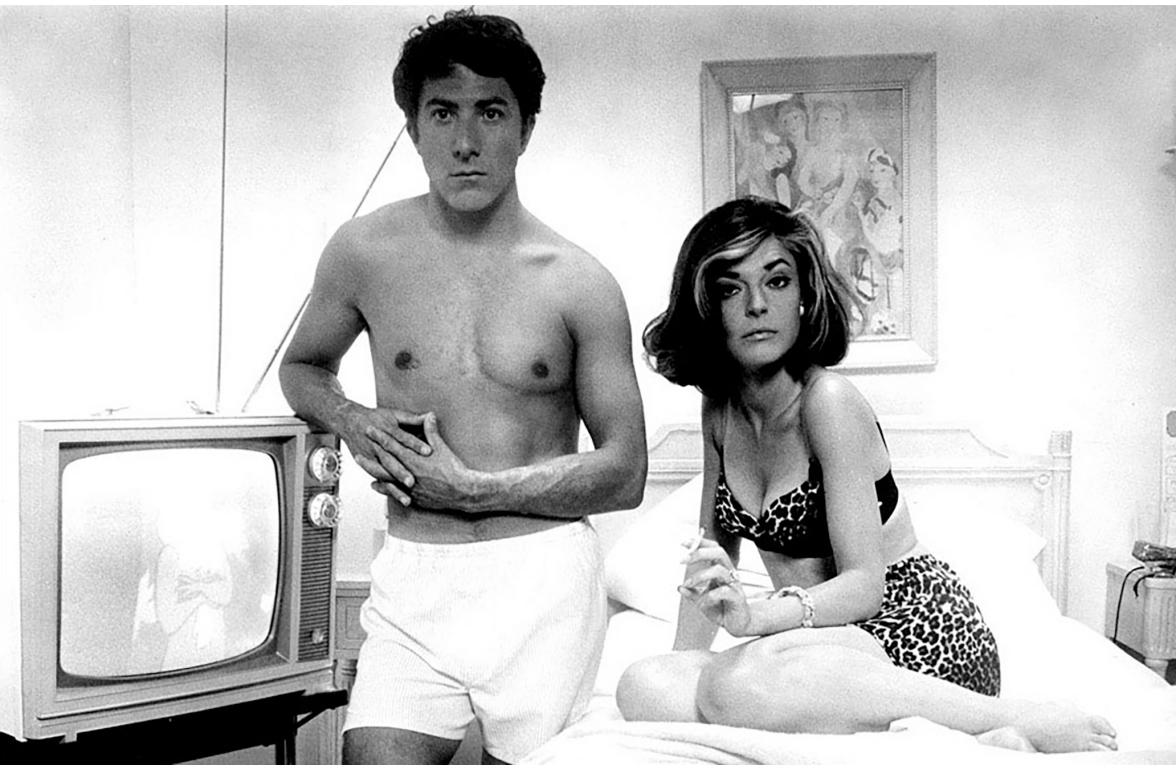
*Behold Homolka* (1969), directed by Jaroslav Papoušek

*Case for a Rookie Hangman* (1970), directed by Pavel Juráček

*Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970), directed by Jaromíl Jireš

*Morgiana* (1972), directed by Juraj Herz





*The Graduate* (1967), Mike Nichols, American

## **Mike Nichols' *The Graduate***

### **Graduation Day**

When Mike Nichols' second film, *The Graduate*, was released on December 21, 1967 (over fifty years ago, which is hard to believe), it proved that he was a genuine director—one to be admired as well as to be concerned about. It also marked the screen début, in a title role, of Dustin Hoffman, a young actor already known in the theater as an exceptional talent, who here increased his reputation. Also, after many months of prattle at the time about the New American Cinema, *The Graduate* gave some substance to the contention that American films were coming of age—of our age.

To wit, during the two years prior to the release of *The Graduate*, there had been a considerable shift in the filmmaking climate. American movies usually reflected the truth of American lives without intending to, because movies manufactured as commercial entertainments were nonetheless inescapably the products of contemporary psyches. But in the mid-1960s many American films started, quite consciously if not always successfully, to come to grips with various social phenomena and certain psychic states. (I'm speaking of a change in well-budgeted theatrical films. Underground films had always tried to treat those matters; one of their reasons for existence was to compensate for the lack of such honest encounter in above-ground films.) This is not to say that psychical substructure had disappeared from these new films, but much that used to be implied or

that only seeped into movies because it couldn't be kept out, was now there by explicit design.

Obviously some "personal" films had been made in the United States before this time, but there was now a strong new direction of which Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* was the first visible marker. Let's define a "personal" film (yet again) as one made primarily because the maker wants to make it, not as a contract job: analogous—as far as the conditions of the medium permit—with a poet's writing a poem or a sculptor's making a sculpture. In most of these films from the mid-to-late sixties and early 1970s, the subject is some aspect of American society or some experience of the filmmaker's that he wants to investigate and correlate with the world. In more of these films than is usual, the director wrote or collaborated on the script.

Here are some of those pictures from the years 1967 to 1969, the period immediately surrounding *The Graduate*: *Greetings*, *Last Summer*, *Easy Rider*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Putney Swope*, *Medium Cool*, *The Learning Tree*, *The Rain People*, *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Goodbye, Columbus*. All these films were (and are) of widely varying quality and proved yet again that to make a film "personally" is no guarantee of artistic success. A straight, contemporaneous commercial film like *Hot Millions* (1968) or *Funny Girl* (1968) is still a lot more rewarding than the trite and sentimental *Learning Tree* (notable only because it is an autobiographical film by a black man about his boyhood). And, in the cases of *Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider*, and *Medium Cool*, the free souls were shown to have their own falsities and self-indulgences to beware of. Still, the promise in this new artistic situation could not be denied.

The reason for such a change in the filmic mainstream was, I believe, the presence in the audience of the millions who had been pouring out of colleges since World War II and, perhaps more especially, the millions who were in colleges at the time: their growing interest in the cinema, their *reliance* on it as they relied on no other art; their rejection of the ludicrousness of the commercial formulas or at least their refusal to accept them as the totality of film (as they were then the totality of television); their concern with the society in which they were living and with themselves in that society; their shame at the

difference between what was happening in the best postwar European film and what had been happening in the United States. The fulcrum on which the production change turned, the essential component, was of course the mind of the financier. He had seen where the money was; at least he had seen that the money was not unfailingly where it dependably used to be; and in his bewildered thrashings-about, he now sometimes thrashed toward the personal film—and a needed avenue was thus opened.

There were at least two possible results of this change. First, critical standards began to be applied to American film that were cognate (not identical) with those for any other art; as a result, there was less need for a lopsided critical theory like *auteurism*, imported from France and deliberately built askew so that it could slide past commercial distortions to judge whatever of merit was left inside. Second, as I point out above, American cinema started to engage, as consciously and explicitly as any other art, with social and psychical matters. Much, of course, remained mysterious and uncontrollable, perceptible only after the event, like so much in all art and in life. But the equation had shifted. More aesthetic matters now moved into the area of design and control; and what was left down there in the uncontrollable depths consequently resounded even deeper.

### **The Graduate in Context**

Now let's talk about the place of *The Graduate* itself in this seismic cinematic shift. The film's screenplay, based on a 1963 novel of the same name by Charles Webb, was written by Calder Willingham and Buck Henry. The latter man, like Nichols, was an experienced satiric performer. (Henry appears in this picture as a hotel clerk.) The dialogue is sharp, hip without rupturing itself in the effort, often moving, and frequently funny except for a few obtrusive gag lines. The story is about a young cop-out (in the jargon of the period) who—for well-dramatized reasons—cops at least partially in again.

Benjamin Braddock is a bright college graduate who returns from the east coast to his wealthy parents' home in Pasadena and flops—on his bed, on the rubber raft in the family pool. Politely and dispassionately, he declines the options thrust at him by bourgeois, barbecue-pit

society: a scholarship to graduate school and a position in the plastics industry, among others. His mother and father, however, are keen for their son to get on with his life and are only interested in talking up his academic success, athletic prowess (as a track star at school), and possible future. Mrs. Robinson, the bored wife of his father's law partner, then proceeds to seduce Benjamin, though he is increasingly uncomfortable in the continuing affair—for moral reasons of an unpuritanical kind. The woman's daughter, Elaine, comes home from college and, against the mother's wishes but in obedience to his parents' insistence, Benjamin takes her out. Indeed, he falls in love with the girl, which is predictable but entirely credible. Eventually he is blackmailed into telling Elaine about his affair with her mother and, in revulsion, she flees—back to her university in Berkeley, in northern California, for the fall term. Benjamin follows, hangs about the campus, almost gets her to marry him, loses her (through her father's interference), pursues her, and finally gets her.

To dispose at once of the tedious subject of frankness, I note that some of the language and bedroom details pushed that frontier (in American films, at least) considerably ahead, but it is all so appropriate that it never has the slightest smack of daring, let alone opportunism. What is truly daring, and consequently refreshing, is *The Graduate*'s moral stance. Its acceptance of the fact that a young man might have an adulterous affair with an older woman and still marry her daughter (a situation not exactly unheard of in America in the 1960s although not previously seen in the American cinema) is part of the film's fundamental insistence: that life, at any time in our world, is not worth living unless one can *test* it day by day, by values that ring true to the day.

Moral attitudes at the time, far from relaxing, were getting stricter and stricter among a certain segment of the population, with the result that many of the shoddy moralistic acceptances that dictated mindless actions for decades were being fiercely questioned, especially by the young. Benjamin himself is neither a laggard nor a lecher; he is, in the healthiest sense, a moralist: someone who wants to know the value of what he is doing. He does not rush into the affair with Mrs. Robinson out of any social rote of "scoring" any more than he avoids Elaine Robinson—because he has slept with her mother—out of any social

role of taboo. In fact, although he is male and eventually succumbs, he sees the older woman's advances as part of the syndrome of a suspect society. The result is that the sexual dynamics of the story propels Benjamin past the sexual sphere; it forces him to assess and locate himself in *every* aspect of his society.

Sheerly in terms of moral revolution, all of this would have seemed pretty commonplace in the late sixties to readers of contemporary American fiction. But we are dealing here with an art form that, because of its inescapable broad-based appeal, follows well behind the front lines of moral exploration. In the United States the cinema follows less closely than in some other countries, not because American audiences are necessarily less sophisticated than others but because the great expense of American production encourages a producer to cast the widest net possible. None of this is an apology for the film medium; it is a fact of film's existence. One might as sensibly apologize for painting because it cannot be seen simultaneously by millions the way a movie can.

Hence the arrival of *The Graduate* in 1967 can be viewed two ways. First, it was an index of moral change in a substantial segment of the American public, at least of an awakening of some doubts about past moral acceptances. Second, it is irrelevant that these changes were arriving in the cinema a decade or two decades or a half-century after the other arts, because their statement on film makes them intrinsically new and unique. If arts have textural differences and are not simply different envelopes for the same contents, then the way in which *The Graduate* affects us makes it quite a different work from the original novel and from dozens of novels of moral disruption or exploration around the time it was made. Nonetheless, some literary critics in the sixties deplored the adulation by young people of "serious" films, saying that the "messages" they got from Bergman, Antonioni, and Godard—and subsequently Nichols—had been stated by the novel and even the drama thirty or forty years earlier. But this is not really true: for if art as art has any validity at all, then the cinema's peculiar sensory avenues were giving those "old" insights a presence—in sight and sound, time and space, intimacy and scope—they could not otherwise have.

## Novel into Film

Let me concentrate for the moment on the very novel from which the film of *The Graduate* was adapted. Besides the fact that a great deal of Webb's good dialogue (which comprises most of the book) is used in the screenplay, the structure of the first two-thirds of the book—until Benjamin goes to Berkeley—is more or less the structure of the movie. The longest scene in the picture—the bedroom one in which Benjamin comically tries to get his mistress to *talk* to him—is taken almost intact from the novel. But Mike Nichols and his screenwriters rightly sensed that the last third of the book bogged down in a series of discussions, that the novel's device for Benjamin's finding the place of Elaine's wedding was not only mechanical but also visually sterile, and that in general this last third had to be both compressed and heightened.

Doesn't the film split in half as a result? This has been a recurrent question about *The Graduate* over the years, and it requires comment. Benjamin does not change, in my view, from the hero of a serious comedy about a frustrated youth to the hero of a glossy romance; he changes *as Benjamin*. It is the difference between the women in his life that changes him. Being the person he is, he could not have been dignified and assured with Mrs. Robinson any more than he could have been ridiculous and uncommanding with Elaine. We can actually see the change happen—during the scene with Elaine at the hamburger joint where Benjamin puts up the top of his sports car, closes the windows, and talks. *Talks*—for the first time in the film at any length. Those who insist that Mrs. Robinson's Benjamin should be the same as Elaine's Benjamin are denying the effect of love—particularly its effect on Ben, to whom it is not only joy but escape from the nullity of his affair with her mother and the impending nullity of himself. There is even a cinematic hint early in the picture of the change that is to come: our first glimpse of the nude Mrs. Robinson is a reflection in the glass covering her daughter's portrait on a wall.

In character and in moral focus, then, the film does not split, but there is a fundamental weakness in the novel that the movie tries, not entirely successfully, to escape. The pivot of the action shifts, after the story shifts to Berkeley, from Benjamin to Elaine. From then on, he knows what he wants; it is she who has to work through an internal

crisis. It was Nichols' job to dramatize this crisis without abandoning his protagonist, to show the girl adjusting to the shocking fact of Benjamin's affair with her mother, and he had to show it with, so to speak, only a series of visits by the girl to the picture. To make matters worse, the environment—of the conventional campus romantic comedy—works against the seriousness of the material, the revisionary nature of this particular romantic comedy. The library, the quad, the rooming house, the classroom corridor have to be *overcome*, in a sense. Nichols never lets up his pressure on what he feels the film is about, but the obliqueness of the action at this point and the associative drawbacks of the locale never quite cease to be difficulties.

Charles Webb himself objected to the film of *The Graduate* on the ground that, unlike his novel, the movie does not take a moral stance. He based his objection on the fact that, in the book, Benjamin arrives at the church in time to prevent Elaine's marriage to another man, and in the film he arrives *after* the ceremony. I myself don't understand how the author of this book could equate morality with marriage licenses. In any event, not only does Nichols' solution avoid the destructive cliché of having Benjamin get there Just in Time, but it is also completely in character for Benjamin: he has impertinently had an affair with the married Mrs. Robinson, and now—at least for the time being—he will impertinently be having an affair with the married Elaine.

There is one point in Webb's novel, however, that I wish had been made explicit in the film. The author makes sure we know that Benjamin is not a virgin when he goes to the hotel room for the first time with Mrs. Robinson. I had always assumed that Benjamin was not "intact" simply because of his age, his kind, and the time period (again, the late sixties), but there is no evidence in the film one way or the other. Moreover, I know from anecdotal evidence that there are still many people who assume he is a virgin, and this makes a great difference in their view of the first hotel encounter. If that is a scene about a novice, it is a conventional skit about sexual initiation; if Benjamin is not a novice, then the scene is about the distress of a young man torn between shock—after all, this woman probably wheeled him around in his baby carriage!—and his sexual urges. Such a conflict, between

rigid social conventions and surrogate Oedipal drives (Mr. Robinson says at one point that he regards Ben as a son), is the source of a deeper, darker comedy.

## **Mike Nichols, Director**

This brings us to the central artist of the entire enterprise, Mike Nichols. In his first picture, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), he was shackled by Edward Albee's famous play and by the two power-house stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton; but considering these handicaps, he did a creditable job, particularly with his actors. In *The Graduate*, uninhibited by the need to reproduce a Broadway hit and with freedom to select his cast, Nichols moved fully into film. Here he is perceptive, imaginative, witty; he has a shrewd eye, both for beautiful imagery and for visual comment; he knows how to compose as well as to juxtapose; and he has an innate sense of the manifold ways in which film can be better than *he* is and therefore how good he can be *through* it—particularly through its powers of expansion and ellipsis.

From the very first moment, Nichols sets the key. We see Benjamin's face large and absolutely alone. The camera then pulls back, we see that he is in an airliner, and the captain's voice tells us that it is approaching Los Angeles; but Benjamin has already been set for us as *alone*. We follow him through the terminal—aptly, on the airport treadmill, or moving walkway, but at the far right of the frame, not in the center where we would expect to see the protagonist (and with his image soon to be replaced by that of his suitcase on the conveyor belt). Benjamin seems just as completely isolated in the crowd here as he does later, in a scuba-diving suit at the bottom of his family's swimming pool, when he is huddling discontentedly in an underwater corner—literally as well as figuratively “underwater,” “all wet,” or “out of his depth”—while his twenty-first birthday party is being bulled along by his father up above. (Glass will often be used in the film, be it the glass of a scuba helmet, a window pane, a car windshield, or the fish tank in his room, as a barrier to suggest Benjamin's isolation or separation, entrapment, and even suffocation.) Indeed, particularly in such sequences as his welcome-home party—where the handheld camera stays close to Benjamin and pans with him as he weaves through

the crowd, moving to another face only when he encounters it—it is as if Benjamin's narrow or tunnel-like or closed-off attention were controlling the camera's. The effect is balletic, in that Nichols here is seeking out quintessential rhythms, and quintessential states, in commonplace actions.

So much was this director seeking out such rhythms and states that he gave his cinematographer, Robert Surtees, license to experiment with filming techniques, as when the latter shoots Benjamin at some distance running straight at the camera—a technique that makes him look as if he is getting nowhere even though he's running. (This effect is accomplished with a very long telephoto lens, which foreshortens distances in relation to the camera.) Even though Ben is running very fast as his character races to prevent Elaine's marriage to someone else, the effect of the shot is to make him appear to be furiously running in place, getting nowhere—which is exactly how he feels at this moment. In another scene, Benjamin is walking from the right side of the screen to the left, while everyone else in the scene is moving from left to right. In Western culture, people or things that move from left to right seem natural (think of the direction in which one reads words on a page), whereas those that move from right to left seem to be going the wrong way. Such a visual technique thus echoes one of the film's points: that, from a conventional point of view, Benjamin is going the wrong way and getting nowhere in life.

Along with visuals, Mike Nichols also understands sound. The device of overlapping sound is somewhat overused (beginning the dialogue of the next scene under the end of the present one), but in general this effect, much like the match cuts (cutting from Ben lying on the raft in the family pool to him lying in the hotel bed), adds to the dissolution of clock time, creating a more subjective time connected with Benjamin's drifting, "timeless" consciousness. And Nichols' use of nonverbal sound does a good deal to fix subliminally the cultural as well as temporal locus: for instance, a jet plane swooshes overhead—unremarked—as the married woman precipitously invites Benjamin into her house for the first time.

The musical soundtrack, in the case of this film, combines the nonverbal with the verbal, as it consists of folk-rock songs sung and

played by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. The lyrics, it's true, deal a bit too easily with such matters as God, *angst*, the "sound of silence," and social change, but at least they *deal* with these matters rather than just tugging at our heartstrings or otherwise cueing us emotionally, as most movie music does. Moreover, Simon and Garfunkel's tunes are typical of the musical environment in which Benjamin, and Elaine, live; this is the music that, in 1967, they themselves would have been listening to on records or the radio, and that some young men are in fact listening to on a car radio in the parking lot of the hamburger joint.

## **Mike Nichols, Director of Actors**

I want now to make much of Mike Nichols' ability to direct actors, a factor generally overlooked in appraising film directors—many of whom, unlike Nichols, did not begin, let alone remain, in the theater. (Nichols' began his stage career as a comic performer, and his subsequent Broadway directing credits include Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* [1963], Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* [1976], Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* [1984], Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* [1992], Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* [2001], and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* [2012].) Some famous directors—Alfred Hitchcock, for example—can do little with actors; they get only what the actor can supply on his own. Sometimes—again like Hitchcock—these directors do not even seem to be aware of bad performances: think only of Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964) and of almost all the principals in *Topaze* (1969). Nichols, by contrast, helped the otherwise histrionic Anne Bancroft to a quiet, strong portrayal of the mistress, who is bitter and pitiful. With acuteness he cast Elizabeth Wilson, a sensitive comedienne, as Benjamin's mother. And from the very pretty Katharine Ross, Benjamin's girl, he got a performance like none she had ever given before or has given since: of sweetness, dignity, and a compassion that is simply engulfing. Even the actor playing Ben's father, William Daniels, whose WASP caricature is a staple item in Stanley Donen's *Two for the Road* (1967), is helped by Nichols to give that caricature new life here.

In the leading role, Nichols had the sense and the courage to cast Dustin Hoffman, unknown (to the screen) at the time, physically

slight, and unhandsome, and to surround him with the blue-eyed, blonde-haired adonises associated with southern California—one of whom you might have expected to see in the part of Benjamin himself. (Webb's novel says that Ben is 5'11" or so, and, in addition to being a track star and head of the debating club at college, he's a WASP—unlike the Jewish, and Jewish-appearing, Hoffman.) Hoffman's anti-heroic face in itself is a proof of change in American film of the late 1960s, for it is hard to imagine him in leading roles ten years earlier. How unimportant, how *interesting* this quickly becomes, because Hoffman, when well directed, is one of the best actors of his generation: subtle, vital, and accurate. Certainly he is the best American film comedian (comic actor, not jokester of the kind embodied by Robin Williams or Steve Martin) since Jack Lemmon, and, as theatergoers discovered before he entered film, Hoffman has a much wider range than Lemmon, appearing in the 1960s in plays as different as Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), Bertolt Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923), Murray Schisgal's *Jimmy Shine* (1968), and Ronald Ribman's *Journey of the Fifth Horse* (1966)—to be followed later by Hoffman's performances in films as varied as *Madigan's Millions* (1968), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Tootsie* (1982), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Perfume* (2006), and *Boychoir* (2014).

With palpable tact and lovely understanding, Nichols and Hoffman and Ross—all three—show us how this boy and girl fall into a new kind of love: a love based on recognition of identical loneliness on their side of the generation gap, a gap that irrefutably existed despite the fact that it was often sillily exploited in the politics and pop culture of the day. When Elaine's father is, understandably, enraged at the news of his wife's affair with his prospective son-in-law and hustles the girl off into another, "safe" marriage (to a medical student named Carl Smith), Benjamin's almost insane refusal to let her go is his refusal to let go of the one reality he has found in a world that otherwise exists, for him, behind a pane of glass. The filmic metaphors of the chase after the girl—the endless driving, the jumping in and out of his sports car, even his eventual running out of gas—do have some slapstick about them, making *The Graduate* rise close to the surface of mere physicality. But at least the urgency never fails: the urgency of a young gen-

eration's belief—still amply manifested all around us—in the value of romantic love in an arid world.

At the wedding, when Benjamin finds it—and of course it is in an ultra-modern church, in Santa Barbara—there is a dubious hint of crucifixion as he flings his outspread arms against the (literal) pane of glass that separates him from Elaine, and thus from his very life. But this symbolism is redeemed a minute later when, with the girl, Ben grabs a large cross, swings it savagely if not sacrilegiously to stave off pursuers, then jams it through the handles of the front doors to lock the crowd in behind them. The pair jump onto a passing bus (she is still in her wedding dress) and sit in the very back, as the aged, uncomprehending passengers turn and stare at them, dumbfounded. Benjamin and Elaine sit next to each other, breathing hard, not even laughing, just happy—and the film ends.

## **Comedy and Criticism**

Nothing is solved—none of the things that bother Benjamin, in any event—by this ending, by the fact of their being together; in fact, one could say that their troubles have only begun, because Elaine is legally married to another man: Carl Smith. (In addition, her parents are divorcing; one can be fairly sure that the law firm of Braddock and Robinson will be splitting up as well; Ben has yet to face his parents about any of these matters; and neither Ben nor Elaine has a source of income.) But, for Benjamin, nothing would be worth solving without her. We know that, and she knows that, and all of us feel very, very good about it. The chase and last-minute rescue (to repeat, just *after* the ceremony is finished) are contrivances, to be sure, but they are contrivances tending toward truth, not falsity, which may be one definition of good art.

Nichols played to his strength in *The Graduate*, which is comedy; with all its touching moments and its essential seriousness, this is a very funny picture. To some viewers, a comedy about a young man and his father's partner's wife immediately seems adventurous, while a comedy about a young man and a girl automatically gets shoved into a pigeonhole. We have only to remember (and to me it is unforgettable), however, that what is separating these young lovers is not a

broken date or a trivial quarrel but a deep taboo in our society. For me, therefore, the end proof of the film's depth is the climax in the church, with Dustin Hoffman (even more moving the more times I see him) screaming Elaine's name from behind the glass wall. A light romance? I don't think so. This is a naked, final, dramatic cry to the girl to free herself of the meaningless taboo, to join him in trying to find some possible new and better truth by which to live.

Some elements of slickness and shininess in this widescreen color film are disturbing, it has to be said. I disliked Nichols' recurrent affection for the splatter of headlights and sunspots on his lens, as well as his weakness for a slightly heavy irony through objects. (The camera holds on a third-rate painting of a clown after Mrs. Robinson walks out of the shot, not the first such painting we see in the film. When Elaine leaves Benjamin in front of the monkey cage at the San Francisco zoo, the camera, too luckily, catches the sign on the cage—Do Not Tease—and then cuts to a few shots of the animals themselves just to make sure we know that a monkey has been made of Ben.) And a couple of times Nichols puts his camera in places that merely make us aware of his cleverness in putting it there: inside an empty hotel-room closet, for example, looking out past the hangers. Additionally, there are some really egregious gags or gag lines: "Are you here for an affair, sir?" the hotel clerk asks the confused Benjamin in the lobby.

Other considerable charges were made against *The Graduate* at the time and have been repeated through the years. Some complained that neither Benjamin nor his parents seem aware that his behavior is not exactly unusual for a college student in the late 1960s; there is no reference—by California parents—to "Berkeley" behavior or dropouts or hippies. I agree that this is a slight omission—the landlord of Ben's Berkeley rooming house *does* ask him if he is one of those "outside agitators"—and it touches on the credibility of the environment Nichols wants to create: what's missing somewhat is an objective correlative for Ben's confusion, anomie, even paralysis in the material, imperialist world of mid-twentieth-century American capitalism. (Such a correlative is missing from Webb's novel as well, which strains, like the film, to make Ben's alienation and depression a response to the *social* scene: to the corrupt mores, bankrupt consumerism, and mindless conformity

of contemporary American society. But, to be fair, the book was published in 1963, before the political turmoil that began in 1965 with the race riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles, the assassination of Malcolm X in Harlem, the public harassment by police of homosexuals gathering on the streets of San Francisco, and Lyndon Johnson's escalation of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War.)

Still others objected that, precisely, there was no mention of the Vietnam War then raging; but if there had been "mention" of it, in a film about domestic problems that would persist long after the end of the Vietnam conflict, *The Graduate* would have been accused of tokenism. Additional critics argued that Benjamin was too "straight," that a film about a radical would have been more significant. On this point I certainly disagree: what interested me in Benjamin was precisely that he *is* "straight" and that it doesn't protect him: the bottom falls out for him anyway. There would have been less drama, and not necessarily any more social truth, in having these events occur to a member of SDS, the student group that during this era organized "teach-ins," anti-war demonstrations, and other political activities across the United States in the name of creating a more democratic society.

Related to this, some have said that *The Graduate* is not about real change but about a little rebellious excursion that ends with happy mating and conformity. I don't find such an assertion supported in the film. There is a happy ending, but, as noted, it is a qualified one: Benjamin's smile on the bus gradually turns into an enigmatic, neutral expression as he gazes ahead, not looking at Elaine; and Elaine, after lovingly looking at Ben, notices the expression on his face and turns away with a similar one on hers. (In a 1970 interview, Nichols said, "When I saw those rushes [of the ending] I thought: 'That's the end of the picture. They don't know what the hell to do, or think, or to say to each other'" [Gelmis, 289].)

## Final Commencement

Despite the defects, then, *The Graduate* bears the imprint of a filmmaker, alive, hungry, and properly ambitious—a whole filmmaker, warts and all. This is a very different imprint from that of a number of Nichols' highly praised, cagy, compromised American contemporaries in the

1960s and 1970s. The defects here show that he is not entirely sure of himself, that he is still feeling his way toward a style of his own. And the kind of cleverness or artiness (sometimes becoming grandiloquence) found in *The Graduate* did plague Nichols in his other early films, but it more or less stopped with *Carnal Knowledge* (1971)—ironically, his last genuinely important picture. His subsequent, far more commercial movies—among them *Working Girl* (1988), *Regarding Henry* (1991), *The Birdcage* (1996), and *What Planet Are You From?* (2000)—stopped taking the risks that sometimes result in artistic flaw and proved that he had always been only a good director who looked for things, other people's things, to do, not an *auteur*-like filmmaker who had things he wanted to do because he himself had something to say.

Still, what's important is not Nichols' subsequently revealed shortcomings or the shortcomings of *The Graduate* itself, but the extraordinary basic talent that the man showed in this film: humane, deft, exuberant. All the talents involved in *The Graduate* make it soar brightly above many other pictures made during the period, and since, and make it, by virtue of its cinematic skill, thematic intent, and sheer connection with its audience, what I called it at the start of this essay: a visible marker, or milestone, in American movie history. Milestones do not guarantee that everything after them will be better (the New American Cinema, after all, quickly became old when some personal films—the fuddlers, fashion-mongers, or arty fakers—didn't make money, just as the French New Wave ebbed quickly when so many of those pictures lost money); nonetheless, they are ineradicable.

Box-office receipts themselves neither prove nor disprove anything about ineradicability, let alone quality, but they do prove something about immediacy; and the financial facts about *The Graduate* at the time of its release are staggering. As of January 7, 1970, the first and second movies on *Variety*'s list of "All-Time Box-Office Champs" (rated by distributors' receipts from the United States and Canada) were *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), with \$72 and \$71 million respectively. Third was *The Graduate*, with \$43 million. Third place in only two years, compared with the longer periods that the first two pictures had been in release. (With its receipts adjusted for inflation, *The Graduate* was still number 21 on the same list

as of the second decade of the twenty-first century, behind the likes of *Avatar* [2009] and *Titanic* [2007], the new number one and two—but, I’m sad to say, with few pictures of artistic quality anywhere else on the list of 500 that I examined.) Consider, too—which even those who dislike *The Graduate* probably would not deny—the difference in ambition between this film and the only two movies up to 1970 to attract bigger audiences, and then the impact of Nichols’ picture becomes all the more staggering.

If, as some believe, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) was instrumental in attracting young Europeans to film in the late sixties, the equivalent American landmark was Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate*, whose romantic tale continues to attract “graduates” today (in an America whose social fabric is unraveling for different reasons, but whose politics is as contentious as ever, on the national as well as the international level). This was the film that attracted me, that’s for sure. I saw it alone on a spring evening in 1968 (shortly after I myself had temporarily dropped out of college and was facing the military draft), stayed up all night thinking about how wonderfully different it was compared to all the other American movies I’d seen, then promptly saw the picture again the next day—with my girlfriend. I’ve been re-seeing *The Graduate*, and reflecting on it, ever since.

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## Filmography: Representative Examples of the New American Cinema

*The Pawnbroker* (1965), directed by Sidney Lumet  
*Mickey One* (1965), directed by Arthur Penn  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), directed by Mike Nichols  
*David Holtzman's Diary* (1967), directed by Jim McBride  
*Up the Down Staircase* (1967), directed by Robert Mulligan  
*Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), directed by Martin Scorsese  
*Cool Hand Luke* (1967), directed by Stuart Rosenberg  
*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), directed by Arthur Penn  
*The Graduate* (1967), directed by Mike Nichols  
*In Cold Blood* (1967), directed by Richard Brooks  
*Greetings* (1968), directed by Brian De Palma  
*Head* (1968), directed by Bob Rafelson  
*Faces* (1968), directed by John Cassavetes  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), directed by Stanley Kubrick  
*Midnight Cowboy* (1969), directed by John Schlesinger  
*Easy Rider* (1969), directed by Dennis Hopper  
*Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), directed by Larry Peerce  
*Medium Cool* (1969), directed by Haskell Wexler  
*Coming Apart* (1969), directed by Milton Moses Ginsberg  
*Alice's Restaurant* (1969), directed by Arthur Penn  
*Putney Swope* (1969), directed by Robert Downey, Sr.  
*Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), directed by Paul Mazursky  
*The Wild Bunch* (1969), directed by Sam Peckinpah  
*Last Summer* (1969), directed by Frank Perry  
*The Learning Tree* (1969), directed by Gordon Parks  
*The Rain People* (1969), directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), directed by Sydney Pollack  
*Little Big Man* (1970), directed by Arthur Penn  
*M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), directed by Robert Altman  
*The Strawberry Statement* (1970), directed by Stuart Hagmann  
*Joe* (1970), directed by John G. Avildsen  
*Getting Straight* (1970), directed by Richard Rush  
*Five Easy Pieces* (1970), directed by Bob Rafelson  
*Catch-22* (1970), directed by Mike Nichols

*Drive, He Said* (1971), directed by Jack Nicholson  
*Carnal Knowledge* (1971), directed by Mike Nichols  
*McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), directed by Robert Altman  
*Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), directed by Monte Hellman  
*The Last Picture Show* (1971), directed by Peter Bogdanovich  
*The French Connection* (1971), directed by William Friedkin  
*Fat City* (1972), directed by John Huston  
*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), directed by George Roy Hill  
*The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), directed by Bob Rafelson  
*Badlands* (1973), directed by Terrence Malick  
*The Last Detail* (1973), directed by Hal Ashby  
*Mean Streets* (1973), directed by Martin Scorsese  
*The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), directed by Peter Yates  
*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), directed by Marin Scorsese  
*Chinatown* (1974), directed by Roman Polanski  
*The Conversation* (1974), directed by Francis Ford Coppola



*Love* (1971), Károly Makk, Hungarian

# Károly Makk's Love

## Makk, Film, and Hungary

Károly Makk (1925-2017) had to wait five years before he could make *Love* (1971), one of the most moving commentaries on life under political tyranny that has ever been filmed. The tyrant concerned was Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971), one of the last of the Russian puppets who ruled Hungary with an iron hand and made political opponents disappear. *Love* is set in 1953—three years before the Hungarian Uprising of 1956—when Hungary was under a totalitarian rule during which thousands of Rákosi's real and imagined foes were killed or arrested. This film could only be made after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which also marked a turning point, at least in terms of cultural policy, in Hungary.

Makk's *Love* is, well, about love. It concerns a dying old woman in Budapest whose son is in prison for political activity, although she believes he is in the United States; her daughter-in-law, who forges letters from the son describing his glorious American career as a film director, so that the old lady (who has already lost another son, to war) can die happy; and the son himself, who is released from prison unexpectedly but too late to see his mother. When you have heard those admittedly unimpressive facts, you know as little as I did when I first heard them. Yet, this is a film of depth and delicacy—small-scale but true. Basically it is a political film: at least it is about the stubbornness of individual feeling, more than individual thought, in a society not designed for

wide variations in either. And it is also about how living in such a society affects the feelings: fidelity, faith or illusion, love.

The director, Makk, who began in film as an assistant to the directors Zoltán Fábri and Zoltán Várkonyi, is famous in Hungary and worked into old age (his last feature was released in 2010). Yet he is virtually unknown abroad. Nonetheless, five of his films—*Lily Boy* (1954), *Cats' Play* (1972), *A Very Moral Night* (1977), *Another Way* (1982), and *The Last Manuscript* (1987)—have been nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Festival; *Cats' Play* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best-Foreign Language Film in 1974; and *Another Way* won the award for Best Actress at the 1982 Cannes Festival. *Love* itself won the Cannes Special Jury Prize in the year of its release; newly restored and digitized, this film was also selected for screening as part of the Cannes Classics section at the 2016 Festival, in part to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Uprising.

## **Story to Screen**

The script of *Love* was adapted by Péter Bacsó (1928-2009) and Tibor Déry (1896-1977) from two of the latter's own autobiographical stories (“Szerelem” [“Love,” 1956] and “Két asszony” [“Two Women,” 1962]); the photography is by a wizard of black-and-white named János Tóth (born 1930); and the light-fingered editor is György Sívó (died 1991). Together, they have all focused sympathy and art on this slender story to make it not only moving but microcosmic. *Love* deals specifically with Hungary but has an absolutely universal appeal; a good deal about a great deal is encompassed in this little film.

Let me begin with a brief summary of Déry's two stories. The background of “Love” is formed by the politically motivated, government show trials in Hungary—trials whose outcomes, as we can guess, were decided upon even before the proceedings began. “Love” follows the encounter between B., a convicted politician, and his wife upon B.'s release from prison after a seven-year stretch. The reader registers B.'s hesitant reactions to life outside, as well as his anxiety about re-uniting with his wife and seeing his son for the first time. The most iconic scene in the story also finds its way into the final minutes of Makk's full-length feature film, when the woman washes the man, at

once raising him up to a Christ-like pedestal and giving back to him the intimacy craved by all human beings.

The background of “Two Women” is shaped by the consequences of the events of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising and the fight for freedom against the Soviet forces. “Two Women” portrays the tense but close relationship between Luca and her mother-in-law, an elderly lady of Austrian origin, now bedridden—a relationship that forms the core of Makk’s film. Luca brings letters from János, her husband, and apparently a famous film director in the United States, to the old woman, who, while anticipating her son’s return to Hungary, eagerly interweaves the details of his fantastic life with her own memories. It is only after she dies, and in the story’s last sentence, that we discover János is in prison for political reasons related to the anti-Soviet rebellion—something that Luca, of course, has known all along.

### **Love and Love**

The film begins with some flashes of the old lady in her bedroom, rising from her bed, going slowly to her window, all of this latticed with old photographs and details of her life, and accompanied by a faint tinkle like the memory of a music box. Thus before the picture is two minutes old, you know you are in the hands of discriminating artists who are going to tell you a story of pathos without being pathetic. Indeed, the very gentleness of the lyrical, imaginative editing has a hard edge of selectivity about it, of restraint.

*Love* revolves around the daughter-in-law’s ironclad reality and the mother’s ephemeral present, which is infiltrated by slivers of remembrances from her long-ago past. Memories (of something as ordinary as a briefly glimpsed bench), fantasies (of six men riding on horseback through a forest, for example, or of movie-made America), and even dream sequences (in one, the old lady dreams of her son’s life in a French castle on the highest mountain in New York) invade the old woman’s bedroom during a cold, wet spring and merge with the room’s everyday objects (a clock ticking, a piece of fruit on a table). The film’s blends past and present by using flashbacks or first-person “narration,” a popular technique throughout the Eastern Bloc in the 1970s. For flashbacks demystify collective memory by means of *individual* memo-

ry, and introduce subjectivity as a counter to the monological narrative of the Party-State.

Throughout the film, the viewer is thus placed in a position that alternates between the external and internal, the real and imagined. As the camera observes the old woman from afar, for example, the sense of confinement and stillness is heightened, trapped as she is behind windows and lying dormant in bed. When this inactivity is punctured by the images she conjures up, however, we see a woman brought magically to life, her mind exploding onto the screen. The camera flits seamlessly between making us look at her and *through* her, so that the divides between inner and outer, fiction and reality, eventually break down and a kind of dreamlike, timeless quality is created. In this way the film's rhythm also creates feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability from one scene to the next—as in “Where are we?”; “Why are we here?”; and “How much time, if any, has passed: a week, a month . . . ?

Indeed, apart from the use of terms such as *kitelepítés* (forced relocation, usually from cities to the countryside) and *társbérlok* (co-tenants), which place the film in the early 1950s, one cannot say for certain that *Love* is not a contemporaneous document of Hungary in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Indeed, the trauma suffered by the characters could easily have taken place at some point in the period between the two world wars. In any event, Makk and his editor's deliberate transpositions of past and present themselves undermine any attempts to tie the film to a specific point in time.

Feelings of temporal uncertainty, of course, are precisely the ones felt by the elderly woman's son: one day he was at home, the next day he was a political prisoner and his wife did not know whether he was still alive; for some years he was imprisoned, and then, one day, some Communist functionary decided to set him free. We never find out why the son was arrested, and the sole government officials we see are those overseeing his release (and possibly two men who claim to be from the telephone company). The son's incarceration seems to require explanation, for it was highly unlikely that such an individual would have committed a serious crime. Yet, it is precisely the mystery, or the pointlessness, of the prison sentence that constitutes one of the major—and unresolved—narratives of the film: the reason for the son's

imprisonment, or his release, is simply not given, either to him or to the viewer. In the taxi on his way home, the driver asks, “*Politikai?*” [Political?]—a question that the now gray, middle-aged son need not, or cannot, answer. This is all deliberate, of course, partly because *Love* was still filmed under the auspices of a Communist government (albeit one that had moved on from the terror of the Rákosi regime), partly because Makk obviously wishes to concentrate on the personal aspect: on how living under these political conditions affects the everyday lives of ordinary people.

As for the forged letters themselves, they help the film to raise the question not only of the fictions we create in our own minds, but also those that we create for others. These letters are very elaborate, written in such detail that even the elderly woman’s devoted maid, Irén, claims they are beyond the realm of probability. So why doesn’t this mother suspect that all is not as it seems to be? The daughter-in-law tells the maid that the old lady is “deaf and blind” when it comes to matters concerning her son. Such is her love for him that she will believe any news of his supposed success. However, there is another interpretation: that she wants to believe the content of the letters and gives the impression of believing it wholesale, but that she has some idea of the truth. For example, at one point when she is reading one of the letters, Makk intersperses her words (heard out loud as well as in the form of mumblings or mutterings in the background), thoughts, and imaginings—the life of her mind, as it were—with flashes of the prison cell where we later see her son imprisoned. Should we therefore believe that the inclusion of these shots suggests that this man’s mother suspects what really happened to him, and that she is intentionally deluding herself as to the picture her daughter-in-law paints of his success abroad?

## **Women in Love**

The daughter-in-law, Luca, is played by Mari Törőcsik (born 1935), a fine actress of charm and wit, young at the time but with long experience on stage and screen. Luca comes regularly to visit her bedridden mother-in-law, with flowers, and between the two there is a fabric of real affection, nicely and credibly tempered with impatience

and jealousy on both sides. The old lady admires Luca's beauty and steadfastness but admires them less in themselves than as proof that her son chose well. Luca, very bright, knows this; likes it and resents it; and teases the old woman, who is Austrian by birth and apparently has a German accent in Hungarian.

Bedridden, always feeble, Lili Darvas (1906-74) nevertheless creates, in the old woman, an entire woman: tender, domineering, cultivated, silly, perceptive, and frightened of dying without her son at her side. Ms. Darvas made her début in Budapest as Juliet in 1921, and in the late 1920s was engaged by Max Reinhardt to learn German and join his company. She was thus a bilingual leading actress in the years before the Second World War, playing in the German-speaking theater and occasionally going back to Budapest. Among her other roles, for many years she did a new play written for her every year by her husband, Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952). She came to America when Hitler came to Vienna, and her career from that point on was not what it would have been otherwise. But at least we have this film.

Through Luca's visits to her mother-in-law, the little duels and meals shared and expenses deplored, we get much of the past of both, pivoted on the son—the person missing from each of their lives. The fact of his absence, which is omnipresent; Luca's deception of the old woman so that she can die proud (and so that she does not die from shock at the revelation of her son's arrest); our knowledge of the political climate they all inhabit and that the son is a kind of hero—all these give the film an overall atmosphere of freighted quiet. There is more not heard in the picture than heard. Still, the old woman and the young one love and tease each other; and, sprinkled through in quicksilver flashes, we get the world of the old lady's youth with its elegance and happy marriage and savor.

Ultimately, Luca loses her teaching job because of her husband's politics and her friends desert her. She has to take lodgers in her small apartment, and she moves into a back room. But she keeps up appearances for her mother-in-law with the maid's help. Subsequently the old lady breaks her leg, develops pneumonia, and, after a last quasi-flirtation with a young doctor fond of music, she dies. (Something, which, in the vein of this reticent film, we do not actually see.) Then, suddenly, the state releases the son.

This, clearly, is from the end of the first of the two Déry stories that are the source of the script. Far from letting the seam show, Makk makes the most of the transition—to this central character whom we have not yet seen. At the end of the last “mother” sequence, the screen fades to black. Then dots of light break the blackness as the grill on the son’s cell door is opened. His name is János (not “B.”, as in “Love” the story), and he is in the film for only the last fifteen or twenty minutes; what insures the picture against faltering is that he is played by Iván Darvas (1925-2007; no relation to Lili).

## **Men, Art, and Feeling**

Mr. Darvas had made many films before and made many afterwards. (His theater triumphs included *Hamlet* and *My Fair Lady*.) He is an actor of very easy richness, and he fills this small but crucial role with every tonality you have been led to expect in the son. As he makes his way from his cell to the prison office to his home, he creates a man relieved but not free, glad but within limits, hopeful because—perhaps *only* because—he is alive. During the prisoner’s journey home, for instance, this actor expresses perfectly not just the joy of freedom but the fear of finding that those he loves have forgotten him, or have somehow freed themselves from him. Luca did not expect him and is not home. So you know there is going to be a scene where she walks in and finds him, and in a way you dread this moment.

Will it spoil the film, with emotion too glibly tapped? The answer, resoundingly, is no. Luca comes into the kitchen and sees him—the husband who has been in prison for a year and whom she expected to be there for another nine years—sitting quietly by the stove, eating a large slice of bread and butter. The camera holds on her alone; and in that moment, this lovely girl grows old. Everything that she had fought off during the past year catches up with her as she looks at him. There are a few flashes of their embrace before they embrace, and in fear of that embrace, she turns aside. Then he comes to her, and the film ends as it began: quietly, in love. (That their love binds them together and sustains their marriage, we may assume, given the fact that Makk directed a sequel of sorts in 2003 titled *A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda*, and starring both Mari Törőcsik and Iván Darvas.)

Let me add, about love of the kind found in *Love*, that in this case the treatment of this emotion happily avoids the excesses of sentimentality, on the one hand, and irony, on the other. Naturally the cinema, like literature, has always taken profound emotion as one of its primary subjects; and being moved, in art as in life, may be the oldest emotion of them all. But great filmmakers like Károly Makk, like great writers, make it new every time. (I do not use the word “great” lightly here. Though Makk did not make such an outstanding film again, he made this one; and maybe it is true that sometimes a filmmaker has one classic in him and no more than one, in which everything he wishes to say is said almost perfectly and in a way that cannot possibly be repeated.) These artists do so with unembarrassed earnestness, a willingness to consider the world seriously and uncorrosively, without any interest in cynicism or nihilism, alienation or revolt, the hip or the cool. All of which, like irony, are really the flip side of sentimentality, that sweet instrument of evasion and shield, whose strong and touching feeling the lesser artist uses to deflect strong and heartless pain.

Indeed, if the seven deadly sins were reconsidered for the postmodern age, vanity would be replaced by sentimentality. The most naked of all emotions, relegated to Hallmark cards and embroidered pillows, sentimentality is one of the distinctive elements of kitsch. “The heart surges”—could there be a better description of a person in the throes of sentiment, whose heart expands to absorb its impact? But, as with other sins of excess, the line here between the permissible and the scandalous resists easy definition. As Somerset Maugham put the matter, “Sentimentality is only sentiment that rubs you the wrong way” (entry 1941). And Maugham doubtless knew that, with the exception of puppy dogs or little children, love is the most sentimental of subjects, and sentimentality is the pitfall that all great love stories must overcome.

*Love* may not be a love story in the traditional sense, but it is a love story nonetheless. However, unlike great sentimental characters such as Jay Gatsby and Emma Bovary—who, by novel’s end, must somehow be disabused of that emotion, unsentimentalized, just before death (the reverse of the process undergone by Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* [1905])—János’s mother, for all her filial feeling, seems disabused of sentimentality almost from the start. That

is because, as an indigenous member of a lower social order than the titular characters of Fitzgerald and Flaubert, she cannot afford it, in both senses of the word.

János's mother has no "title" like "Great" or "Madame"; hers could only be the generic, anonymous, unadorned one of Mother, if she were part of her film's title in the first place. But she isn't. And neither is her son. And thus are we quietly informed that it is to the emotion of love, not to herself, that she—and he—would be devoted. Which is sentiment that rubs me the right way.

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## Filmography: Key Hungarian Works, 1945-2000

*Somewhere in Europe*, a.k.a. *It Happened in Europe* (1947), directed by Géza von Radványi

*Liliomfi* (*Lily Boy*, 1954), directed by Károly Makk

*Merry-Go-Round* (1956), directed by Zoltán Fábri

*The Corporal and the Others* (1965), directed by Márton Keleti

*Elégia* (*Elegy*, 1965), directed by Zoltán Huszárík

*The Round-Up* (1966), directed by Miklós Jancsó

*Cold Days* (1966), directed by András Kovács

*The Red and the White* (1967), directed by Miklós Jancsó  
*The Witness* (1969), directed by Péter Bacsó  
*The Toth Family* (1969), directed by Zoltán Fábri  
*The Falcons* (1970), directed by István Gaál  
*Love* (1971), directed by Károly Makk  
*Dead Landscape* (1972), directed by István Gaál  
*Photography* (1973), directed by Pál Zolnay  
*Adoption* (1975), directed by Márta Mészáros  
*The Fifth Seal* (1976), directed by Zoltán Fábri  
*Mattie the Goose-boy* (1977), directed by Attila Dargay  
*Angi Vera* (1979), directed by Pál Gábor  
*Little Valentino* (1979), directed by András Jeles  
*Csontváry* (1980), directed by Zoltán Huszárik  
*Narcissus and Psyche* (1980), directed by Gábor Bódy  
*The Fly* (1981), directed by Ferenc Rófusz  
*Mephisto* (1981), directed by István Szabó  
*Time Stands Still* (1982), directed by Péter Gothár  
*Another Way* (1982), directed by Károly Makk  
*Diary for My Children* (1984), directed by Márta Mészáros  
*The Annunciation* (1984), directed by András Jeles  
*Colonel Redl* (1985), directed by István Szabó  
*Hanussen* (1988), directed by István Szabó  
*My Twentieth Century* (1989), directed by Ildikó Enyedi  
*Mind the Steps!* (1989), directed by István Orosz  
*Twilight* (1990), directed by György Fehér  
*Junk Movie* (1992), directed by György Szomjas  
*Sátántangó* (*Satan's Tango*, 1994), directed by Béla Tarr  
*Sunshine* (1999), directed by István Szabó





*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), Fred Schepisi, Australian

## **Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith***

### **New Australian Cinema**

Prior to the late 1970s, Australia was something of a cinematic backwater. Occasionally, Hollywood and British production companies would turn up to use the country as a backdrop for films that ranged from the classic (*On the Beach* [1959]) to the egregious (*Ned Kelly* [1970], starring Mick Jagger). But the local movie scene, for the most part, was sleepy and unimaginative and very few Australian films traveled abroad. Then, without warning, Australia suddenly experienced an efflorescence of imaginative filmmaking, as movies such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), and *Breaker Morant* (1980) began to be shown all over the world. Hitherto unknown talents from behind the camera (including Peter Weir and Bruce Beresford) and before it (most notably Mel Gibson and Judy Davis) became overnight sensations and were snatched up by Hollywood.

Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) is one film from this period that had a significant impact on the shaping of Australian cinema. In American history there are Indians and blacks. In Australian history, the social place and function of both those races are filled by one race, the black aborigines. Like the Indians of the United States, they were the first inhabitants; like American Indians, hundreds of thousands of them were slaughtered in the name of "manifest destiny"; like blacks in the U.S., they remain the largest, cheapest,

needed-cum-hated labor force. These aspects are the ground of *Jimmie Blacksmith*, the second feature directed (and written) by Schepisi, who, along with Weir, Phillip Noyce, Beresford, Tim Burstall, George Miller, and Gillian Armstrong, was one of the key directors of the New Australian Cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s.

### **Jimmie's Song**

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* broke ground in its native country for dealing bluntly with one of the most tragic aspects of Australian history: the racist treatment of the aboriginal population, which consisted of five million people before Westerners arrived in 1788 and numbers only several hundred thousand today. (In Tasmania, white Australians used to run aborigines off cliffs; in New South Wales, where *Jimmie Blacksmith* takes place, they herded them together and shot them like bandits.) Adapted faithfully from the 1972 novel by Thomas Keneally (subsequently the author of *Schindler's List* [1982]), the film concerns a young man of mixed race, or "half-caste," in turn-of-the-century Australia who feels torn between the values and aspirations of white society, on the one hand, and his aboriginal roots, on the other, and who ultimately takes to violence against his perceived white oppressors. (The narrative was inspired by the true story of Jimmy Governor, a half-aboriginal Australian of the late nineteenth century who went on a rampage and killed seven whites.)

It is 1900 and Australia is on the verge of Federation, but relations with England and the world are of no importance compared to the greed for property on the part of white Australians: over and over in this film we see fences going up whereby the whites appropriate the natives' land; beyond that, there are legal, social, and economic fences that keep the aborigines out and down, their once tribal, nomadic existence reduced to subsistence in squalid shanty towns. The product of a white man's visit to a shanty-town whore, Jimmie Blacksmith is one of these natives, and is lucky—or unlucky—enough to have been raised and educated by a Methodist minister, Mr. Neville, and his wife. While the aboriginal community views him without prejudice, white society sees him only as a "darky," a "nigger," and a "black bastard."

As a young adult, Jimmie is sent out with a reference letter from the minister to seek employment. The racist Australians he encounters, however, do not view him as a peer, and he is only able to secure menial labor jobs such as fence-builder or shit-shoveler. At every place he works, he is cheated out of his wages and driven away with violence when he tries to collect his money. Nonetheless, Jimmie tries very hard to be a “good boy,” takes his orders and does his work, suffers his exploitations and insults, and cheerily slogs on; indeed, he is bright in addition to being hardworking, and he is not naïve—he expects to be cheated and insulted, even as, like all black workers in Australia, he expects (however unwillingly) to have to share his meager wages with otherwise idle relatives. For a while, Jimmie is employed as a police-tracker by a constable who makes regular raids on a settlement of aborigines living in poverty and advanced alcoholism. There, on horseback, Jimmie must club innocent aborigines or stand by as the drunken constable brutally kills a black suspect, but his shame at such “collaborationist” duties forces him to leave this job.

He eventually lands work at a sheep-shearing station, where conditions are somewhat more tolerable than he previously experienced. He also has a quickie sexual encounter with a white kitchen servant (who has also been enjoying carnal favors from the other men of the station and is thus half servant/half slut—and herself a metaphoric half-caste). When she becomes pregnant, Jimmie marries her. However, the arrival of the baby—a completely white baby—shows that he was not the father and that his nobility was in vain. (The minister’s wife had encouraged him to marry a white farm girl; by the time his grandchildren came, she told him soothingly, they would be only one-eighth black.) Jimmie cherishes his wife and child, yet buffets continue until a point where he and his family have nothing to eat and the farmer for whom he works, Jack Newby, denies him credit as a stratagem not only for separating Jimmie from his white wife, but also for driving away Jimmie’s freeloading black relatives.

But this time, he finally snaps and is at last abused over the edge into murder—mass murder. Jimmie’s “declaration of war” against the whites is based on what he overhears much earlier about the British having declared war against the Boers in South Africa. When he asks

what “declaring war” means, a skeptic answers, “It means you can officially go in and shoot the buggers . . . till they agree with you or leave you alone.” This is what Jimmie wants (though the parallel is not belabored by the film), and all the drive he had exerted to attain the white world he now turns to destroying it. For the Newbys represent what Jimmie wanted a wife for in the first place—he wanted to be them. And so, of course, they enrage him most.

Using an axe, he murders the wife and daughters of his employer. And we realize that only when they bleed do these excessively white, pink, blond, and obtuse beings acquire full humanity, and that only through killing them can Jimmie in any sense, however misguided and horrible, reach them. (Schepisi realizes that the true horror is not that racists are personally monstrous, though some may well be: their cruelty is especially ugly on account of its impersonality, the fact that they never see anything but the color of a black man’s skin.) A black uncle who is with him joins in the killing, not so much out of fury as loyalty. They flee, accompanied by Jimmie’s full-black half-brother, Mort, who had been trailing him throughout his journeys, and now joins Jimmie as the latter revisits (with gun in hand) all of those who wronged him in the past.

Mort is something like the noble (Indian) savage or Negro of American literature, but he’s not a warrior or a mighty hunter. There’s nothing overtly heroic about him; he’s essentially passive and relaxed—a loyal, easygoing bum in ragged tweeds. This bum makes us see what the Europeans have destroyed in Australia, for he’s the simplest yet the most civilized person in the movie. The tribalism he accepts means that he doesn’t have to prove himself, like the tormented Jimmie: he is part of everything. To wit, Mort has nothing yet feels rich. Jimmie suffers from the perils of Christian individualism; he wants respect, property, *and* whiteness, and his failure to achieve them rots and twists him. It’s Jimmie, rather than a full-blooded aborigine, who explodes in violence because he has tried the individualistic white way and been rejected. His tragedy is thus to be caught between two worlds.

Soon the countryside is aflame with the horror of these two aboriginal serial killers, Jimmie and Mort, on the loose; ironically, a

black auxiliary policeman helps the white posse track them just as Jimmie himself was once a turncoat. He and Mort, for no clear reason, take a white male schoolteacher as a hostage for a short period, but this hostage becomes something of a burden, falling lethally ill in the outback. Mort agrees to take him back to his village but in doing so, he is discovered and killed. Jimmie, alone in the wilderness, is left to outrun the hostile society that never wanted him as an equal but now only desires him as a gift for the gallows. The end of Jimmie, with half his lower jaw torn away by a bullet, captured in a convent (and handed over by nuns, from whom one might have expected charity), carted off to jail with soldiers protecting him from a mob (and with the hangman peering through a peephole in the door to his cell, speculating on the resistance of his unusually developed neck muscles), then, on the night before he is hanged (a hanging delayed until *after* the ceremonies surrounding Federation, so as not to embarrass the proud young nation by reminding it of what it had done to the natives), talking in his cell with the minister of his boyhood, who says he takes the blame on himself for what has happened—all this iron grimness is suffused by the sense that death has finally caught up with a man who has been dead for some time.

Dead, finally, because of the maddening inconsistency in Australian society in the treatment of aborigines—kindness from some whites, injustice from others—that drives the aborigine to distraction and destruction (not least because the original white settlers of Australia themselves were former pariahs, convicts who had been cast out of England.) This inconsistency is visually highlighted during the scene in which the minister, Neville, visits Jimmie on death row. Neville and Jimmie are shot in compassionate close-up, whereas the hangman, Hyberry, evaluates Jimmie's neck muscles in a medium long shot to which the peephole supplies a natural iris effect. This is obviously an uninvolved, indeed unfeeling, way of shooting such a scene, and a manner of shooting that is only intensified by Hyberry's earlier being told he will be made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for his executioner's services.

## **Period Picture, in Style**

Like Schepisi's 1976 début film, *The Devil's Playground* (a pains-taking reconstruction of the director's growing up in a Catholic seminary), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is set in Australia's past, at the time when the country can be said to have achieved nationhood: roughly, from the 1890s to the end of World War I. Period films such as this were at the very center of the Australian feature-film revival. Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is popularly credited with beginning the trend and establishing many of the recurrent features of the genre, such as its basis in literature, its picturesque treatment of the rural landscape, and its thematic emphasis on institutions and education and how they are often inimical to individual personality and positive self-identity. (See, in particular, the female experience as charted in Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* or Beresford's *The Getting of Wisdom*.)

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, like *The Devil's Playground*, fits broadly within this form: for example, white society with its material aspirations, which the Reverend Neville encourages Jimmie to pursue, is nothing if not a constricting force that severs the protagonist's indigenous roots (something underlined by the fact that his development in this society is seen as an "education"). However, in certain crucial respects Schepisi's film goes further than many of its contemporaries in exploring serious issues in an intelligent, uncompromising way while eschewing the self-conscious, European artiness of a film like Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. In the process, *Jimmie Blacksmith* emerges as an intense and bleak story of the inevitability of violent confrontation between segregated races.

The style of the film, particularly its editing and *mise-en-scène*, are perfectly attuned to this central thematic core. The opening, pre-credit sequence that cuts between the young Jimmie undergoing his tribal initiation in the bush—an initiation that includes scarring of the chest but is followed by Jimmie's difficult return to the minister's house in Western clothes—and the Reverend Neville at home bemoaning the boy's unexplained absence, perfectly lays out this style. The disparity and distance between the races, between the whites and the aborigines, is immediately underlined in the contrast between the cluttered,

sterile, and materialistic indoors of the Neville household, on the one hand (filled with crockery similar to the kind later smashed as Jimmie commits his first murders, of the Newbys), and the natural, open expanses of the bush, on the other. To reinforce this point, there is a later scene at the Nevilles' dinner table in which Jimmie, on the eve of going out to make his way in the world, thanks the reverend and his wife for his "education." In one extended sequence shot, the camera begins by framing the meal on the table before tilting up to the reverend (dominant in the center of the screen and at the head of the table) and then slowly tracking out to tightly compose the scene from a distance through the doorway, with Jimmie hemmed-in on the left side of the screen. Such a composition underlines Jimmie's social entrapment by visually constricting him within the frame, which is dominated by the reverend and all he represents.

As in Keneally's source novel, the film's narration, though ostensibly omniscient or unrestricted, aligns itself closely with the titular protagonist's mindset and his experience of the two communities between which he is torn. Once again, it is the *mise-en-scène* that underlines Jimmie's experience: the aforementioned scene at the Nevilles' dinner table contrasts with many exterior scenes where extreme long shots repeatedly frame Jimmie as dwarfed by the landscape around him, graphically foregrounding the fact that, unlike true aborigines, Jimmie cannot live on the land and achieve liberation or freedom within it. (The insistent use of the telephoto lens, which flattens people out against a background brought closer while they seem only specks against it, makes this point.) Like a white man, Jimmie's specific wish is to own land, and such a white desire to conquer and dominate the landscape (one of the key myths—or problems—of Australian nationhood) crucially separates him from his spiritual roots as represented in the opening scene's tribal initiation. Other features of the film also reinforce this idea of segregation and of Jimmie as homeless in the wilderness: Jimmie's job constructing fences underscores his sense of separation and his desire to possess his own land; and the sporadic cutaways to close-ups of insects, worms, lizards, and snakes (reminiscent of such shots in Nicolas Roeg's seminal *Walkabout* [1970]) connote a sense of the hostility of the land—

or, conversely, the idea that full aborigines are so much a part of the land that they see things in it, animals and plants, which whites especially just do not perceive at all—through which Jimmie passes, a land as alien to him as to the middle-class Caucasian schoolchildren of Roeg's film.

Conversely, while the film's narration can be seen to work in this faux-subjective manner, it simultaneously maintains a largely objective camera and editing style for much of the picture's duration, with almost no point-of-view shots. By denying Jimmie any overt look, any self-generated gaze, Schepisi thereby figuratively connotes his fundamental lack of social agency and standing, his powerlessness. The one important point-of-view shot allowed Jimmie occurs when he is captured and carried from the convent while being harangued by whites. In other words, he is privileged with a look only at the moment that the looks *at him* by those higher in society than he (with their status visually underlined by having Jimmie look up at them) are at their most pronounced. Nothing works for Jimmie, yet the short or even quite short scenes with which Schepisi puts together his movie, the distance between the camera and the nasty events depicted, the very indistinctness of the sound in certain scenes (I do not mean the hard-to-understand accents, white and black), the confusion in and around Jimmie—all this militates against sentimentality in the film, and creates instead a sense of pervasive injustice in almost impersonal terms. Indeed, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is assembled like a mosaic—one whose brief, nervous, densely packed scenes function as nearly self-sufficient vignettes etched in bitterness or grim irony, and whose cumulative effect is to achieve an aura of helplessness and ineluctable doom.

Violence? Yes, *Jimmie Blacksmith* gets to a lot of it, with axes and guns, though no more explicit than necessary. Compare these killings with those in a contemporaneous, violence-peddling film like Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980). The razorings in this picture are the reasons for its existence: everything before and after is trumped up with glossy psychologizings, to make the razors possible. Nothing is trumped up in *Jimmie Blacksmith*: the violence is grounded and ordained, and Schepisi is careful not to revel in it. “Where your

treasure is, there will your heart be also," says the Bible. De Palma's treasure is razors; Schepisi's treasure is Jimmie. Why? Because *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is only nominally about a spontaneous act of violence; its true center is the destruction of a race.

### **Jimmie Blacksmith in Production . . . and Beyond**

The central power of the film naturally rests in the character of Jimmie Blacksmith, and Schepisi took something of a gamble by casting an untried, nineteen-year-old actor in the leading role, Tommy Lewis (who, like Jimmie, is of mixed race). Lewis is a handsome and virile presence who looks great on the screen, but he also imbues his role with an astonishing depth of emotion. Riding the emotional gamut from great joy (the scene where he performs the chant—actually an aboriginal dance, not a song—to celebrate his baby's birth) to utter despair (his final humiliation, shivering and chained in a cold jail cell, his face disfigured from the gunshot wound), Lewis gives a performance that is nothing less than extraordinary for a film début. He carries the film, and is enchanting, graceful, and deeply moving in doing so; his strength and beauty in the part, his hatred of *everything* after he starts killing, his numbness after the jaw wound, are all like pure movements in music. (Sadly, Lewis's subsequent film career has consisted primarily of supporting or guest roles in Australian films, most notably in John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* [2005].)

With a shooting schedule of only fifteen weeks, and locations requiring that the crew travel 5,000 miles, Schepisi had the job of blending a large company of the finest white stage and screen performers with aborigines—most of them non-professionals who were trained while the film was being made. He succeeded, and then some. Every part, without the smallest exception, is well cast and acted. Ray Barrett, a brutal policeman, Peter Carroll, the schoolteacher whom Jimmie takes as a hostage, and Steve Dodds, who plays Jimmie's black uncle, do particularly clean-lined work. They are professional actors. Freddy Reynolds, who plays Jimmie's black half-brother, is not a professional actor, yet he, too, is wonderful. This speaks to the casting by Schepisi's wife, Rhonda, and of course to the innate gifts of these performers, as well. But, for me, the work Schepisi did with his actors,

professional or not, is one of the strongest talents that he shows in this film. I don't expect ever to forget Reynolds' ease in nature, the wilting of hate in him through natural sunniness; or the stunning moment after the first murders when Dodds sits shivering, or his brief speech in the dock after his sentence.

What seems especially remarkable in this thesis film is the suggestion of concealed lives in several of the white characters—vicious, patronizing, lordly, or politely obtuse—who shape Jimmie's irreversible action. Kept at middle distance from them, so that the youth's tragedy will be foremost, you feel that an entire film could be made from any of the participants who impose themselves briefly and pass on. Not without their complexities, they exhibit gruffness that is countered by grudging bits of fairness, just as their decency is shot through with arrogance, stupidity, and greed. We can see how these former British pariahs and their descendants need to assert themselves at the expense of someone else—the aborigines beneath them. Credit for these teasing inferences belongs equally to Schepisi and to the excellent actors and actresses with whom the Australian cinema is abundantly stocked.

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was the first Australian film to be featured in official competition at the Cannes Festival, in addition to being the first Australian feature to treat the “problem” of the aborigine as something more than exotic cultural baggage. In Australia, however, the film was not a box-office success when it was released in 1978, and it received only an equivocal critical reception. Audiences were particularly uncomfortable with its presentation of Australia’s troubled racial history and with the fact that in the film an aboriginal Australian was killing white people (especially with an axe). Overseas, though, *Jimmie Blacksmith* had more success (although fourteen minutes of footage were deleted for the international version). It opened in the United States in the fall of 1980 and its popularity was such that it enabled Schepisi to immigrate to Hollywood, where he went on to direct such films as *Iceman* (1982), *Roxanne* (1987), and *The Russia House* (1990). The critics Pauline Kael and John Simon were effusive in their praise

for *Jimmie Blacksmith*, while Schepisi was invited to Cannes in a continuation of that Festival's love affair with New Australian Cinema, which had been initiated by Ken Hannam's archetypal *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975). Hannam's picture was selected for screening at the Directors' Fortnight (an independent program presented in parallel with the Cannes Film Festival) in 1975, as was *The Devil's Playground* in 1976. By 1978 there were twenty Australian films at Cannes, including *Jimmie Blacksmith*.

Following this accomplishment, several new Australian films were significant hits at the Cannes Festival in the next two years, including Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* in 1979 and Beresford's *Breaker Morant* in 1980. Both these pictures gained American distribution based in part on the strength of their European festival reception, and their respective European success itself was built on the foundation of the breakthrough achieved by *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. It truly was an Important Film, even if its reception in Australia prompted Schepisi to move to America to continue his career. His next film may have been the forgettable western *Barbarosa* (1982), but no one who sees *Jimmie Blacksmith* will forget it: it is with this stunning, heartbreaking work that Schepisi made, and will keep, his reputation.

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## Filmography: Key Works of the New Australian Cinema

*Walkabout* (1971), directed by Nicolas Roeg

*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), directed by Bruce Beresford

*The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), directed by Peter Weir

*Petersen* (1974), directed by Tim Burstall

*Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), directed by Peter Weir

*Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), directed by Ken Hannam

*The Devil's Playground* (1976), directed by Fred Schepisi

*Don's Party* (1976), directed by Bruce Beresford

*The Last Wave* (1977), directed by Peter Weir

*Backroads* (1977), directed by Phillip Noyce

*Summerfield* (1977), directed by Ken Hannam

*The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), directed by Bruce Beresford

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), directed by Fred Schepisi

*Newsfront* (1978), directed by Phillip Noyce

*Mad Max* (1979), directed by George Miller

*My Brilliant Career* (1979), directed by Gillian Armstrong

*The Odd Angry Shot* (1979), directed by Tom Jeffrey

*The Plumber* (1979), directed by Peter Weir

*Breaker Morant* (1980), directed by Bruce Beresford

*Manganinnie* (1980), directed by John Honey

*Gallipoli* (1981), directed by Peter Weir

*Puberty Blues* (1981), directed by Bruce Beresford

*Heatwave* (1982), directed by Phillip Noyce

*The Man from Snowy River* (1982), directed by George T. Miller

*Monkey Grip* (1982), directed by Ken Cameron

*We of the Never Never* (1982), directed by Igor Auzins

*Lonely Hearts* (1982), directed by Paul Cox

*The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), directed by Peter Weir  
*Careful, He Might Hear You* (1983), directed by Carl Schultz  
*My First Wife* (1984), directed by Paul Cox  
*Burke & Wills* (1985), directed by Graeme Clifford  
*The Fringe Dwellers* (1986), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*The Year My Voice Broke* (1987), directed by John Duigan  
*The Lighthorsemen* (1987), directed by Simon Wincer  
*A Cry in the Dark* (1988), directed by Fred Schepisi  
*Emerald City* (1988), directed by Michael Jenkins



*Lola* (1981), Rainer Werner Fassbinder, German

## Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lola*

### Fassbinder, the FRG Trilogy, and New German Cinema

Perhaps in ironic reference to the sentimental, idyllic postwar genre of the *Heimatfilm* (homeland film), Rainer Werner Fassbinder once said, famously, that he was trying to construct a house with his films, which is hard, enervating, and even dangerous work. Many filmmakers have left their own houses half-finished. But, with the possible exception of, say, Yasujiro Ozu, Fassbinder was the only one who left a beautiful, livable dwelling into which others might enter and be inspired to build their own. Had he lived, he would surely have made modifications and built many extensions, but the fact that he left us with a finished product is fairly astonishing given the short time he had to complete it. Not every part of the house is equally interesting: Think of *Satan's Brew* (1976) as the plumbing and *Chinese Roulette* (1976) as the wiring. The three films that comprise the famous FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) trilogy, as it came to be known, are the rock-solid foundation—or, perhaps, the central staircase: *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), *Veronika Voss* (1982), and *Lola* (1981).

Unlike most of the other houses going up around him at the time, built with flimsy modern foundations that did not go deep enough (for fear of hitting the rotten substratum of Nazism), Fassbinder's house was built with a sense of history. Of his generation, Fassbinder was the only director whose interest in German film history neglected neither

the period of the Third Reich nor the much-disparaged 1950s. He had no fear of contact when he was giving parts to such actors as Luise Ullrich, Werner Finck, Adrian Hoven, and Barbara Valentin, whereas most of New German Cinema was busy relegating former stars to the background and making its farewell to “Papa’s cinema.”

Fassbinder understood that as a German in the 1970s, one had to do real historical excavation to recreate not just the images but the mental framework of the past, not merely to acknowledge historical amnesia, but to make an effort to understand how and why it manifested itself. Fassbinder once said of the traumatized German reaction to the American television miniseries,

When I see the fuss being made over *Holocaust*, I wonder why they have to make such a fuss; have they really repressed and forgotten all of that? They can’t have forgotten it; they must have had it on their minds when they were creating their new state. If a thing of so much significance could be forgotten or repressed, then something must be pretty wrong with this democracy and this new “German model.” (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 38).

He knew, you see, that all roads led back to the gray, amoral confusion of the 1950s and the years of the *Wirtschaftswunder*—Germany’s postwar economic miracle.

Fassbinder realized that he had to build his house quickly if it was going to have any meaning, which means that he did something almost impossible: He acted at the speed of his emotions and thoughts. He wanted and got a direct correlation between living and fiction-making. This is almost impossible in film production, where there’s a lot of atrophy-inducing waiting time because of the effort, money, needed manpower, tactical and strategic difficulties, endurance tests, and care required to get a presentable image. It’s no wonder, then, that he resorted to cocaine and an assortment of other drugs. Indeed, it would have been shocking if he *had not* done so.

Fassbinder’s nonstop work ethic also allowed him to break through the removed, God’s-eye view that comes all too often with the territory of

modern cinema. He's always *right there* with his characters, in time, space, and spirit. "Should you sit around waiting until something's become a tradition," he once said, "or shouldn't you rather roll up your sleeves and get to work developing one?" (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 32). Too much time spent listening to the music of your own voice gives rise to a temptation to round everything off into a definitive statement; it gives you a sense of false confidence that you're delivering, from on high, the last word on human affairs. By building his house from the inside out, Fassbinder was essentially trying to create a whole body of German films that would stand politically and spiritually against the flood of hypocritical, unfelt cinema that had come before and that was sure to come after. He tried to bypass hazy generalities and windy formulations through sheer speed and determination, and largely succeeded. "There's a sense of process in Fassbinder, a feeling of the movie as it's being made" (389), said the American critic Manny Farber, an early champion. That sense of process, of the movie and the man behind it thinking and reacting as he went along, was there right to the end, even in the fancier and more vaunted later works like *Despair* (1978) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980).

As a result, Fassbinder casts a long shadow. His admirers have followed his example of throwing the moral underpinning out from under their narratives, but with rare exceptions (Olivier Assayas and André Téchiné come to mind), they all lack something that Fassbinder had in abundance, and that more than counterbalanced the endless, discomfited bitching of his characters: a tender eye. Such tenderness was part of a fullness of vision, and of the way he simply *looked* at people, that had not been seen since the silent era. In a 1977 interview, Farber declared that, "If someone sits on a couch in a Fassbinder movie, it's the first time it's been sat on that way in movies, it seems to me, in a long time. It's a big person on a small couch who's uncomfortable. A woman standing in a doorway in a Fassbinder film—that's a great vision. Of someone who's uncomfortable and doesn't like it and emits a feeling of savagery. In ecstatic, hieratic lighting of the kind found in Fra Angelico" (390).

The plasticity of Fassbinder's images is almost unparalleled—in the sound era, only the work of Carl-Theodor Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Jean-Luc Godard, at its very best, has a similar force

and beauty. But Fassbinder had something else, too: He was an inventor. He gave us a whole new point of view, devoid of sentimentality or even grace yet profoundly empathic. In Fassbinder, a magical world of purely human wonders is parceled out to us in the form of tales in which desperation, treachery, scheming, hypocrisy, and ignorance play no small part, and where desire plays a major supporting role but the will to power is sadly dominant. Contrary to the opinion of some, however—and it's an opinion that I myself used to hold—Fassbinder did not make cruel films. His dramatically blunt tales speak, with tremendous urgency, for the Maria Brauns, the Veronika Vosses, and the Lolas of this world. In one sense, then, the films are blunt instruments, but what's most important is that they give the lives of ordinary souls the care and attention they deserve. Fassbinder protected his characters from the infectious diseases of idealization and sentimentality; his filmic space is far from transcendental: There is no beyond, nor any ultimate reality. There is nothing but human relations, given an awesome intensity, elevation, and richness. No one enjoys a state of grace, but everyone is ennobled.

Like a number of other Fassbinder films, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Lola* describe the unconscious, collective enactment of an essentially negative action, namely the suppression of national memory, through hyperdramatic heroines whose fates are intertwined with the imperatives of their awful historical moments. How did the historical moment of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, of the post-war German economic miracle, come into being? Free-market boosters like to believe that it began with the installation of Ludwig Erhard, the economics minister of postwar Germany. In June 1948, when the country was at its lowest moral and economic ebb, Erhard went on the air to make two momentous announcements. The almost worthless Reichsmark would hitherto be replaced by the Deutschemark, forty of which would be distributed to every German, followed by twenty more, and followed by debt conversions at the rate of ten to one. Erhard also took the unprecedented step of dropping the wage and price controls introduced by the Nazis, first on consumer goods and, six months later, on food—a move that even the Allies had not considered. It's likely that Germany's recovery would have gone forward no

matter what measures had been taken, since the country had nowhere to go but up. Still, a reconstruction boom took place under Erhard, and he had a lot to do with it.

Fassbinder himself was wholly uninterested in the reasons behind the miracle and more interested in the less fashionable topic of how the “miracle” narrative came into being in the first place, as well as the level of amnesia required to make it stick. In *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Lola*, Fassbinder saw parts of an overall picture of the FRG that help to answer these questions, as well as to better explain this strange democratic construction—its hazards and dangers, as well as its benefits and sureties. Each of these films, of course, features a female character. “All sorts of things can be told better about women; men usually behave the way society expects them to,” explained Fassbinder in an interview (Töteberg, “Candy-Colored Amorality,” n.p.). His screenwriter Peter Märthesheimer elaborated: “As far as men are concerned, it is instructive that in *Lola*, from a purely dramaturgical point of view, it is not Lola who is the hero, but rather Mr. von Bohm. And what are we told about our hero? That he is a victim. So the secret hero is Lola after all” (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The history of the FRG is told through female characters in the FRG trilogy, which did not start out as one. Originally, Fassbinder had not conceived of three works on the same theme, but now he inserted, in the opening credits under the title of *Lola*, the subtitle “BRD 3” (Bundesrepublik Deutschland 3, or FRG 3).

## **What Lola Wants . . .**

Where *The Marriage of Maria Braun* itself is dark and luxuriously shadowed (like a late-1940s Warner Brothers picture in glowing color) and *Veronika Voss*, in black and white, displayed the visual style of an American *film noir*, *Lola* has an aggressively bright palette of hot pinks and lurid reds mixed with light greens, lemon yellows, and pale blues, married to hard shadows and a relentless, impulsive physicality. (Fassbinder and his cinematographer, Xaver Schwarzenberger, watched Technicolor films from the 1950s to get the look that they wanted.) Former East German star Armin Mueller-Stahl (von Bohm) claimed that he and his costars were constantly entering into

the “red zone” with their performances throughout the lightning-fast shoot, which took place in the spring of 1981. Fassbinder himself encouraged all the participants to dare to go to the extremes in their respective fields, to go to the limit in attempting to extend the scale of cinematographic aesthetics.

They were helped by the film’s music. Melodrama (hyperdrama, even as I have used it—or histrionic drama—may be a better term in this context) is literally drama with music. Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930) had already musically illustrated the world of the bourgeoisie, with its traditional melodies whistled by Professor Rath in the morning, as contrasted with the honky-tonk of current popular songs (“Get out there, give ’em the old schmaltz,” advises the director, shooing Lola Lola out onto the stage). “Classical or modern?” asks von Bohm of Mrs. Kummer in the Fassbinder version, when he learns that her daughter is a “singer.” In fact, the pop hits of the 1950s telling of wanderlust and lovers’ bliss make up Lola’s repertoire in the Villa Fink establishment: “Am Tag als der Regen kam” (“The Day the Rain Came”); “Plaisir d’Amour” (“The Pleasure of Love”); and, above all, Rudi Schuricke’s aforementioned “Fishermen of Capri.”

*Lola*, ostensibly the third part of the FRG trilogy but chronologically the second, was shadowed by Dirk Bogarde’s desire to make another film (after *Despair*) with the director he considered so chaotically brilliant. His idea was to film Heinrich Mann’s novel *Professor Unrath* (1905), which had provided the basis for Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel*. Fassbinder’s producers even offered a settlement to the Mann estate as a precautionary measure (and perhaps to buy the added commercial cachet of a *Blue Angel* remake). The screenwriters Märthesheimer and Pea Fröhlich then turned the tables on Mann’s hero by letting their hero, von Bohm, now a building commissioner, humiliate *himself*, first by making a public spectacle of his hatred of the amoral pimp and building magnate Schuckert, then by withdrawing into a state of nostalgic denial.

Fassbinder wanted to make a film about the 1950s, but the theme of the high school teacher as small-town tyrant, a figure from the era of Kaiser Wilhelm, simply did not fit into the period of the German economic miracle. The protagonist had to have something to do with

the reconstruction of the country, so a building commissioner seemed to be the ideal profession. A big-time building contractor as his antagonist formed a logical constellation. And the whore fit in with the time, as a virtual representative of the 1950s, because—as Fassbinder explains in the press booklet—"the years from 1956 to 1960 were more or less the most amoral period that Germany ever experienced" (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.).

In Mann's novel, the high school teacher Professor Unrath falls into social isolation through his liaison with Rosa Fröhlich, a.k.a. the "artiste" Lola Lola; in Fassbinder's film, the building commissioner, with his moral principles, was an outsider (from East Germany) in the town, but he becomes one of their own through his relationship with Lola. The story is no longer set in nineteenth-century imperial society, but instead in the 1950s. "Of course there was something like bigoted, hypocritical morals," Fassbinder again explains in the press booklet. "But between the people there was an implicitly sanctioned amorality" (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). Lola embodies it, as does Schuckert. The building contractor is the man of the hour: down-to-earth, unscrupulous, and free of inopportune class conceit, unlike his wife, who cultivates it.

Schuckert is not a one-dimensional negative character, however: He is a man of considerable charm, a kind of sympathetic pig. "At least in a period when it came to rebuilding the country," said Fassbinder, "the kind of vitality that this man has to have . . . to be a construction entrepreneur is an admirable vitality" (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The happy ending is disavowed, but so is the melodrama: In contrast to *The Blue Angel*, *Lola* does not end in tragedy or even pathos. To wit, even after their marriage, which integrates von Bohm once and for all into small-town society, Lola remains Schuckert's own private whore. (When, toward the end, she is a guest of the Schuckerts and the marriage, as at the end of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, is effected through a deal about which the man in question knows nothing, once again we hear in the background a radio broadcast from a world soccer championship, this time from 1958 [Germany versus Sweden].) As for the marriage itself, Lola is all in white as she bids farewell, gets into her red convertible—and meets with the building contractor. This is followed

by a closing scene in which von Bohm and his co-worker take a walk in the woods, during which von Bohm's assertion that he is happy does not sound convincing. Thus does the false happy ending get a different accent, for von Bohm seems to have willingly resigned himself to his fate and the fact that Lola is betraying him.

Lola herself may instructively be contrasted here with Maria Braun. "With me, the actual development always lags behind my consciousness," states Maria Braun. In the end she has to recognize that her marriage was based on deception, and the film ends in catastrophe. Lola has no illusions: She will not make a mistake, "because the soul knows more than the mind," she explains right at the beginning. In the Villa Fink she gains insight into the structures of small-town society, but she is excluded from it; she wants to be part of it, however, and the way to achieve that for a woman is still through marriage. Lola knows that her marriage is a deal with a third person, but that is no reason to shun marriage. On the contrary: She has defused an explosive through union with von Bohm, and her marriage is the guarantee that the power structure remains intact. In reference to Douglas Sirk's "weepie" melodramas, Fassbinder once remarked that "love is the best, most perfidious, and most effective instrument of social oppression" (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 84), and in *Lola* he demonstrates this mechanism to perfection.

*Lola* metaphorically demonstrates, then, the arrangements on which the FRG was built, but it is not Fassbinder's aim merely to expose the double morality and ideology of the economic miracle—he was not a moralist. According to Märthesheimer, "*Lola* is also a film about the erosion of bourgeois values under Adenauer, about the junking of conservative ideals in the name of a quick buck" (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The debris of war was pushed aside, but there was no coming to terms with the past; economic reconstruction went hand in hand with political restoration. Von Bohm sees through what is happening, as is revealed in his inaugural address in the town hall, but he believes that the reconstruction will not succeed without "expansive powers," so he doesn't offer any resistance and instead supports Schuckert's plans. Ultimately, then, von Bohm caves in to the capitalist principle. (In this posture, Fassbinder saw a

correspondence to the Social Democrats, who, with the 1959 Godesberg Program forswearing all Marxist ideas, gave up their demands for a reform policy of their own.)

## Last Film, Last Day

Shortly after *Lola*, Fassbinder supplied the missing second part of the trilogy: *Veronika Voss*. Tellingly, *Veronika Voss* was the last film he was able to complete. His next project was to have been a film about Rosa Luxemburg. But in the early morning hours of June 10, 1982—he had just made some notes on the treatment by Märthesheimer and Fröhlich—Rainer Werner Fassbinder died of a lethal combination of cocaine and barbiturates. Manifestly, this was a director who knew how to give his endings, in life as in art, the force of a blow to the solar plexus.

In *Lola*'s own ending, as revised by Fassbinder (from Märthesheimer and Fröhlich's screenplay) and turned into a refrain, von Bohm returns to the pastoral paradise where he "deflowered" Lola, accompanied by her young daughter, who unwittingly re-creates her mother's provocative pose in the hayloft: a harbinger of future sellouts. Lola is thus a character at once real and allegorical, trying to make her way through a misbegotten postwar Germany—a country and time into which Fassbinder himself was born on May 31, 1945, twenty-four days after the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allied armies of Europe. Rainer Werner Fassbinder dedicated his final energies to bringing those lost gray days, and years, back to life, perhaps because they offered the clearest and least obstructed view of humanity at its most vulnerable.

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*Yesterday Girl* (1966), directed by Alexander Kluge

*Young Törless* (1966), directed by Volker Schlöndorff

*Table for Love* (1967), directed by Edgar Reitz

*Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed* (1968), directed by Alexander Kluge

*Signs of Life* (1968), directed by Werner Herzog

*Hunting Scenes from Bavaria* (1969), directed by Peter Fleischmann

*Red Sun* (1970), directed by Rudolf Thome

*Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), directed by Werner Herzog

*The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972), directed by Wim Wenders

*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*Dream City* (1973), directed by Johannes Schaaf

*Alice in the Cities* (1974), directed by Wim Wenders

*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), directed by Werner Herzog

*The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1975), directed by Volker Schlöndorff & Margarethe von Trotta

*Wrong Move* (1975), directed by Wim Wenders

*Fox and His Friends* (1975), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*Kings of the Road* (1976), directed by Wim Wenders

*Heart of Glass* (1976), directed by Werner Herzog

*Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977), directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg

*Stroszek* (1977), directed by Werner Herzog

*The American Friend* (1977), directed by Wim Wenders

*The Left-Handed Woman* (1978), directed by Peter Handke

*In a Year with Thirteen Moons* (1978), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*Knife in the Head* (1978), directed by Reinhard Hauff

*The Tin Drum* (1979), directed by Volker Schlöndorff

*Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), directed by Werner Herzog  
*Sisters, or The Balance of Happiness* (1979), directed by Margarethe von Trotta  
*Woyzeck* (1979), directed by Werner Herzog  
*The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
*Mariane and Julianne* (1981), directed by Margarethe von Trotta  
*Fitzcarraldo* (1982), directed by Werner Herzog  
*The State of Things* (1982), directed by Wim Wenders





*L'Argent* (1983), Robert Bresson, French

## **Robert Bresson's *L'Argent***

### **Oeuvre and Influence**

There aren't many art forms where commercial success is relentlessly equated with aesthetic worth. In painting, the idea that Walter Keane is a greater artist than Robert Rauschenberg because many a 1960s tract house had a Walter Keane painting in it would be laughingly dismissed. And anyone claiming that Rod McKuen's "poetry" outranks the work of Ezra Pound because it sold more might invite censure, even arrest. Among the major arts, it's only in film that popular directors—Steven Spielberg and George Lucas spring immediately to mind—merit innumerable awards, miles of media exposure, and armies of imitators trying to re-create both their "artistic" standing and their financial success. This distressing cultural trend has resulted in some serious cinematic casualties, whose work is largely unseen because there is no sense of critical proportion in the film world, no reasonable critical standard. And the most notable victim in this instance may be the French director Robert Bresson.

It's my view, however, that Robert Bresson was one of the great film artists of the twentieth century, one of the great *artists* of that century. The viewer who surrenders himself or herself to Bresson's work is not likely to remain unaffected by the extreme intensity of the emotions conveyed, the formal rigor of the style, the utter seriousness of the subjects, or the deep commitment of the filmmaker to his own artistic conceptions. Still, Bresson remains little known or

appreciated beyond the most discerning of filmgoers. While the retrospective of his work that traveled throughout the United States and elsewhere in 1998—organized by James Quandt, senior programmer of the Cinémathèque Ontario—helped to change that situation, many viewers still resist Bresson for the very qualities that define his uniqueness. Focusing less on what he offers than on what he withholds, even foreign-film aficionados preferred (and prefer) his flashier contemporaries—Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman—who embodied their existential angst in the emotive performances of star personalities (by European standards, anyway). Bresson not only renounced the star, he banished professional actors altogether from his increasingly detheatricalized, spartanly cinematic universe.

For many, a Bresson film is a punishing experience thanks to the alleged “severity” of his style and the bleakness of his narratives. Yet the frugality of that style—the exactness of its framing and montage, the elimination of excess—has undeniably influenced a slew of contemporary European filmmakers, including Chantal Akerman, Olivier Assayas, Laurent Cantet, Alain Cavalier, Claire Denis, Jacques Doillon, Bruno Dumont, Eugène Green, Michael Haneke, Benoît Jacquot, Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, and Maurice Pialat, although none of these artists reject actors and expressive performances. Still, the adjective “Bressonian” is misused and overused; and, in the end, this filmmaker is inimitable because his style is inseparable from a stern moral vision. Bresson, as uncompromising as his filmic style, offered it straight up: no ice and no water on the side, which is to say without humor, stars, or entertainment in any conventional sense.

Bresson, then, is a true anomaly even by the exacting standards of intransigent *auteurs* like Carl-Theodor Dreyer or Josef von Sternberg. He supposedly was born on September 25, 1907, but, following his death on December 18, 1999, obituaries in the press reported that he was born, in fact, on that day six years earlier, in 1901. If this is indeed the case, then Bresson lived for all but twenty-one months or so of the twentieth century. His filmmaking career itself spanned forty years, from 1943 to 1983, during which time he directed thirteen films. (Bresson disowned his first film, a medium-length surrealist comedy with nods to René Clair and Jean Vigo, *Public Affairs* [1934], which

was rediscovered in the late 1980s after long being thought lost.) That he deserves the title of the most thoroughly twentieth-century artist, simply by virtue of his birth and death dates if not his filmic production, will strike some as ironic at first glance. A deeply devout man—one who paradoxically described himself as a “Christian atheist”—Bresson, in his attempt in a relatively timeless manner to address good and evil, redemption, the power of love and self-sacrifice, and other such subjects, may seem to us, and perhaps was, something of a retrogression. Analysis, however, might show that he establishes his modernity as an artist precisely by “retrogressing” in the manner, and under the particular historical circumstances, that he did.

## **Life and Art, or War, Religion, and Painting**

The details of Bresson’s personal life are not well documented, for he was not given to self-promotion or self-revelation. According to the *New York Times* obituary (Dec. 22, 1999), he challenged a potential interviewer in 1983 by asking, “Have you seen my film?” When the journalist replied that he had, Bresson continued, “Then you know as much as I do. What do we have to talk about?” Nonetheless, we know some of the details of Robert Bresson’s biography. He was born in the small town of Bromont-Lamothe in central France, and first turned to painting after graduating from a Parisian secondary school, where he excelled in Greek, Latin, and philosophy. Marrying at age nineteen (and later remarrying after the death of his first wife), Bresson began in film as a script consultant and collaborated on several scenarios (*He Was a Musician, Brighton Twins, Pure Air*) before the start of World War II. Soon after joining the French army, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned for almost two years (1940-41)—which turned out to be a signal event in his artistic, as well as his personal, life.

This formative influence and two others undoubtedly mark Bresson’s films: in addition to Bresson’s experiences as a prisoner of war, his Catholicism—which took the form of the predestinarian French strain known as Jansenism—and his early years as a painter. These influences manifest themselves respectively in the recurrent theme of free will-versus-determinism, in the extreme, austere precision with which Bresson composes each shot, and in the frequent use of the pris-

on motif. Two films of his are located almost entirely inside prisons: *A Man Escaped* (1956) and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962); and Bresson otherwise often used prison as a metaphor for spiritual imprisonment as well as release. A classic case of the latter is *Pickpocket* (1959), where Michel finds redemption from his criminal career only by intentionally being caught, as he tells Jeanne from his prison cell in the famous final scene, “What a strange road I had to take to find you.”

Three of Bresson’s films take place in a wholly Catholic context: *Angels of the Streets* (1943), a metaphysical thriller set in a convent; *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), a rare instance of a great novel (by Georges Bernanos) being turned into an even greater film; and *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. His Jansenism manifests itself in the way the leading characters are *acted upon* and simply surrender themselves to their fate. In *Au hasard, Balthazar* (*By Chance, Balthazar*, 1966), for example, both the donkey Balthazar and his on-and-off owner Marie passively accept the ill-treatment they both experience, as opposed to the evil Gérard, who *initiates* much of what causes others to suffer. Indeed, Bresson seemed to become increasingly pessimistic about human nature during his career: his penultimate two films even suggest that he had more concern for animals and the environment than for people, while the characters in his astonishing swansong *L’Argent* (*Money*, 1983) are simply the victims of a chain of circumstances undergirded by the maxim that “the love of money is the root of all evil.”

One effect of the Jansenist influence is Bresson’s total mistrust of psychological motives for a character’s actions. The conventional narrative film—actually, the conventional story of any kind—insists that people have to have reasons for what they do. A motiveless murder in a detective story would be unacceptable, for instance. In Bresson, however, people act for no obvious reason, behave “out of character,” and in general simply follow the destiny that has been mapped out for them. Often a character will state an intention, and in the very next scene do the opposite. Characters who appear to be out-and-out rogues will unaccountably do something good, an example being the sacked camera-shop assistant in *L’Argent*, who gives his ill-gotten gains to charity. At the same time, Bresson did not predetermine how his films would finally emerge; instead, it was a process of discovery

for him to see what would finally be revealed, or experienced, by his non-professional actors (or “models,” as he designated them) after he had trained them for their parts.

Bresson’s second influence, his early experience as a painter, is manifested in the austerity of his compositions. A painter has to decide what to put in, a filmmaker what to leave out. And with Bresson nothing unnecessary is shown; indeed, he goes further, often leaving the viewer to infer what is happening *outside* the frame. Thus we often see shots of hands, doorknobs, even *parts* of things in instances where any other filmmaker would show the whole. A Bresson film consequently requires unbroken concentration on the viewer’s part, and I myself have occasionally felt literally breathless after watching one because of the concentration required. It is in fact on account of their economy that many of Bresson’s films are exceptionally fast-moving in their narrative. (One exception is the almost contemplative *Four Nights of a Dreamer* [1971], where little actually happens in this story of unrequited love, whose central character, interestingly, is a painter.) If *L’Argent*, for one, were remade as a Hollywood thriller, it would have at least double the running time and would dwell at length on the brutal violence in the last section, which is merely elliptically hinted at by Bresson. The running time of *L’Argent* is eighty-five minutes, and the running time of each of Bresson’s other films similarly averages under ninety minutes, yet the viewer can be surprised at the amount that happens in that time.

*A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket*, for example, may be first-person narratives of impeccable integrity, yet neither film wastes time establishing character in a conventional—or convenient—novelistic way. Instead, each relies on economical actions to reveal the psychology of its protagonist. Thus as we watch Fontaine, condemned prisoner of the Vichy government, convert the objects of his cell into the means of escape, we discern the qualities of his character—determination, discipline, patience, perseverance, and resourcefulness. We are told at the beginning of *Pickpocket*, by contrast, that Michel has embarked upon an adventure to which he is not suited, but the internal conflict this implies is expressed less in complex dialogue or voice-over narration than in the increasingly detached, de-dramatized manner in which his

thefts are filmed. In both pictures, then, it is the physical *action*, meticulously composed and edited, that consumes most of the screen time, in the process giving the audience adventures in audio-visual perception as acutely tuned as those of the protagonists.

Having achieved in *Pickpocket* and *A Man Escaped* what he believed was a truly “cinematographic” (more on this term soon) art, Bresson turned to *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, at sixty-five minutes his shortest work, in which the dominating principle—ironically for this artist—is language. Still inadequately appreciated, it is perhaps the most extraordinary rationale for his style, perfectly suited to the sober business of presenting the texts of Joan’s two trials—the one that condemned her and the one that rehabilitated her years after her death—without drama, excess, or theatrical flair. Next to Carl-Theodor Dreyer’s eloquent, expressionist meditation on the same subject (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), Bresson’s film, an exercise in control and reserve, seems as committed to a terse, documentary-like approach to history as Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

## Bressonian Sound, Acting, and Script

Along with Bresson’s painterly eye for what should and should not be shown, he made exquisite use of sound: off-screen sound itself is of key importance. The raking of leaves during the intense confrontation between the priest and the countess in *Diary of a Country Priest*; the scraping of the guard’s keys along the metal railings and the far-off sound of trains in *A Man Escaped*; the whinnying of horses in *Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974)—all these sounds serve to heighten the sense that a time of crisis has arrived for the central characters. Voice-over narration is also used, in combination with dialogue—in *Diary of a Country Priest* and *A Man Escaped* as well as *Pickpocket*—to underline the impression of an interior world constantly impinging on, and being impinged upon, by reality. Music, for its part, is used increasingly sparingly as Bresson’s career progresses: a specially composed score can be heard in the early films, but in *A Man Escaped* there are only occasional snatches of Mozart, in *Pickpocket* of Lully, in *Au hasard, Balthazar* of Schubert, in *L’Argent* of Bach; and in some late Bresson, non-diegetic music is dispensed with altogether.

A key ingredient of Bresson's method—indeed, of his ellipticism—is his view of actors, his “models.” From *Diary of a Country Priest* on he used only non-professionals, and was even reported to be upset when two of his actors (Anne Wiazemsky from *Au hasard, Balthazar* and Dominique Sanda from *A Gentle Creature* [1969]) went on to have professional acting careers. Only one actor ever appeared in two of his films: Jean-Claude Guibert in *Au hasard, Balthazar* and *Mouchette* (1967). Actors were chosen by Bresson not for their ability but for their appearance, often for an intense facial asceticism, like Claude Laydu as the *curé* (priest) of Ambricourt or Martin Lasalle as Michel the pickpocket. He then trained them to speak with a fast, monotonic delivery and to remove all traces of theatricality.

It is for this reason that Bresson rejected the word “cinema,” which he regarded as merely filmed theater, and instead used the word “cinematography” (not to be confused with the art of camerawork). As an integral part of this cinematography, all the movements of the actors were strictly controlled by the director: when they walked they had to take a precise number of steps; and eye movements became extremely important—the lowering of the eyes toward the ground almost becoming a Bresson trademark. The result of this approach is that the viewer connects not with a character’s surface appearance but with the core of his being, his soul. Bresson’s first two features—*Angels of the Streets* and *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*, 1945)—do use professionals, even “stars” (in addition to featuring “literary” scripts, a certain artificiality in the lighting, and even a baroque quality to some dramatic sequences), and though they are both excellent films that anticipate the director’s later thematic concerns, each would probably have been even more satisfying if “models” had been used in the major roles.

As for their scripts, all of Bresson’s features after *Angels of the Streets* have literary antecedents of one form or another, albeit updated. Two are from Dostoyevsky (*A Gentle Creature* and *Four Nights of a Dreamer*), two from Bernanos (*Mouchette* in addition to *Diary of a Country Priest*), one from Tolstoy (*L’Argent*), one from Diderot (*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*), while *A Man Escaped* and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* are based on written accounts of true events. In addition, *Pickpocket*

is clearly influenced by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Au hasard, Balthazar* has a premise similar to the same author's *The Idiot*. *Lancelot du Lac*, for its part, is derived from Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian legends, while *The Devil, Probably* (1977) was inspired by a newspaper report, as stated at the start of the film. Even a longstanding, unrealized film project of Bresson's was to come from a literary source—in this case, the Book of Genesis (*Genèse*)—but Bresson reportedly said that, unlike his human “models,” animals could not be trained to do as they were told!

Bresson's radical reinterpretation of literary material, however, frequently made it unrecognizable. A superb manipulator of narrative incident (though he called himself, not a *metteur-en-scène*, the ordinary French term for “director,” but *metteur-en-ordre*, or “one who puts things in order”), he focused increasingly on slight, seemingly irrelevant details in a story, often obscuring or hiding major narrative developments. Bresson's films are difficult at first (and at last) precisely because they lack such familiar and reassuring elements as “plot twists” and establishing shots. “One does not create by adding, but by taking away” (*Notes on Cinematography*, 48), he asserted. Just so, his films are composed of hundreds of relatively brief shots, each one fairly “flat,” with the opening shot as likely to be of a foot or an object as it is of a face or an entire body. Camera movement is kept to a minimum, for—to repeat—the camera shows only what is important and nothing more. Painting taught Bresson that one should make, “not beautiful images, but necessary images” (*Notes on Cinematography*, 45). Necessary words, as well, for dialogue in his films is extremely limited, and the performers, though they may bear features of a mesmerizing intensity, speak “undramatically” or (as I described earlier) “monotonically,” as if they were talking to themselves; even their movements are subdued as well as stiff.

## **Bresson, Philosophy, and the Cinema**

Thus, to describe the thirteen films of Robert Bresson and delineate their themes would probably do little to convey their overall impact. For Bresson worked at the emotional truth of his films with an almost unbearable, even ineffable, intensity, out of a deep feeling of responsi-

bility toward his audience. It was not the aim of his filmmaking to impress viewers with his brilliance or the brilliance of his performers, but to make his audience share something of his own simultaneously tragic and ecstatic vision. “Make visible what, without you, might never have been seen,” he wrote (*Notes on Cinematography*, 39). Accordingly, the dramatic elements in Bresson’s films are built up painstakingly, often through a pattern of repetition-cum-variation. There are no grand finales, since the truth of any of his works lies in every single frame. At the conclusion of a Bresson film one feels, above all else, that one has been brought face to face with an essential problem or condition, and that whatever the specific nature of this director’s world-view, the overall effect has been a deeply human, finally humane one—utterly free of condescension and utterly full of seriousness.

Bresson’s subject, despite the lack of reference in his work to contemporary events, was clearly life in the twentieth century. Yet, in answer to a question about his attitude toward the realistic treatment of that subject, he responded: “I wish and make myself as realistic as possible, using only raw material taken from real life. But I aim at a final realism that is not ‘realism’” (Braudy, 92). And who is to say that his holy trinity of humanity, nature, and the object world did not attain a higher truth than the one attained through the pragmatic, empirical approach adopted by most of his contemporaries? Where they saw the operation of freedom of choice as inevitably joined to the necessity for action, Bresson saw free will operating in tandem with divine grace. Where his contemporaries in the film world saw the material interconnection of all things, he saw the mystical unity of the spiritual and the material. Where they saw man’s intuition into the fathomable workings of nature, Robert Bresson saw man’s communion with supernatural forces that are ultimately beyond our ken.

Indeed, his work seems to play out the sentiment once voiced by Léon Bloy, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century writer who helped bring about the Catholic renaissance in France that certainly marked Bresson’s life and thinking: “The only tragedy is not to be a saint” (Maritain, 117; my trans.). On the other hand, the force for Bresson of such a sentiment may have been the product of his reaction against the Sartrean existentialism that dominated postwar French cultural life—the very period of

Bresson's emergence as a major filmmaker. However, although spiritual essence clearly precedes material existence in his films of that period, it could be argued that the films after *Au hasard, Balthazar* incline toward the reverse, that *Mouchette, A Gentle Creature, Lancelot du Lac, The Devil, Probably*, and *L'Argent* go beyond existentialism in their chronicling of a total collapse of moral and ethical values in a world gone madly materialistic. *L'Argent*, in fact, appears to be an endorsement of Bloy's own early attack on the corruptibility of money.

*Au hasard, Balthazar* itself was a radical departure in many ways, not least because as an allegory of the Christian story, its use of a donkey was the first indication that Bresson had left behind narratives with noble figures in the mold of the country priest, Fontaine of *A Man Escaped*, and Joan of Arc. In addition, as a passive creature—beaten and broken in, nearly worked to death, then hailed as a saint, only to be shot to death by an officer of the law—Balthazar prefigured the protagonists of much of the later work, who, out of indifference or weakness, fail to significantly affect the world around them. *Lancelot du Lac*, for example, is an account of the ineluctable collapse of the age of chivalry, a theme that seems to prefigure the *la ronde*-like study of the nefarious effects of capitalism in *L'Argent* as well as the dissolution of Western values in *The Devil, Probably* (where the mockery of all “solutions” to personal and social ills—whether religious, political, or psychological—affirms a global, apocalyptic pessimism, symbolized by the youthful protagonist’s hiring of someone to kill him as a gesture of protest against humanity as well as society).

For her part, *Mouchette*, the loveless, abused, humiliated young daughter of an alcoholic father and a dying mother, leads so relentlessly oppressive a life (one that includes rape by the village poacher she has befriended) that, rather than resist it, she drowns herself in shame and misery. The “femme douce,” or gentle creature, also commits suicide—at the start of the film. Having thereby drained the drama from *A Gentle Creature* (as well as the color, in this his first color film, which is composed almost entirely of blue and green tones) by beginning it at the end, Bresson then proceeds to reconstruct the woman and her husband’s impossible relationship through a series of flashbacks that show the unbridgeable gulf between them.

Yet this issue of “dark” versus “light” Bresson warrants further examination. For while we continue to divide the corpus of his work into the early films that end in redemption and the later ones of increasing pessimism (even as I earlier did the same), the force of the latter should inspire us to examine the former more closely. Can we dismiss the possibility, for instance, that however deeply spiritual the country priest is, his consumption of bad wine and his poor diet constitute an unconscious death wish that allows him to feel closer to the sufferings of Christ with which he identifies? Bresson himself was no less seized by, and passionate about, his art, every facet of which was infused by his personal and religious convictions, down to the very shaping and cutting of the world in his own image—an enactment of the artist as God that exhibits more control over the filmic universe than the God of most religions exerts over the actual one.

What closer examination reveals is that, however assured and clear Bresson’s narratives (early or late) seem—and their lean, uncluttered style certainly contributes to such an impression—they are never as simple as critical judgment has often made them appear. The darkness that characterizes almost every Bresson film from *Au hasard, Balthazar* to *L’Argent* is already discernible, I would argue, in the image of human nature to be found in *Angels of the Streets*, where the corruptions of the world outside can barely be contained within the convent. From the beginning, careful viewing reveals, Bresson’s characters are consumed by an arrogance and pride that have the capacity to destroy. It is precisely these flaws or sins that the novice Anne-Marie must overcome in *Angels of the Streets* before she can die and redeem the convict Thérèse. By contrast, Hélène, the *femme fatale* of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, unrepentantly believes that she has taken revenge on her former lover by luring him into marriage to a woman who (she later tells him) is a prostitute, only because, in her all-consuming narcissism, she cannot fathom the possibility of genuine, all-transcendent love between two human beings.

## Spiritual Style

Ironically, it was American champions of Bresson who, taking their cues from the subject matter of the first half of his career, christened his style “spiritual” (Susan Sontag, among others) or “transcendental,”

a term first used by the critic-turned-filmmaker Paul Schrader. (The great French Catholic film critic André Bazin, who did not live to see most of Bresson's films, himself championed *Diary of a Country Priest*—in an essay hailed by his English translator as “the most perfectly wrought piece of film criticism” [Gray, 7] he had ever read—as “a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements, are those of the life of the spirit . . . [offering] us a new dramatic form that is specifically religious—or, better still, specifically theological” [Bazin, 136].) These terms continue to haunt anyone writing on Bresson, be it in light of the nascently cynical tone of the earlier films or the decidedly more cynical one of the later pictures. For Bresson, in fact, was out of sync with the ecumenical spirit that seized the Catholic Church in the 1960s, and while many of his films employ Catholic imagery, they are almost all—early as well as late—characterized by a particularly harsh strain of religious thinking closer to that of one of the novelist Georges Bernanos, one of whose novels, as previously indicated, inspired perhaps Bresson's best-known film, *Diary of a Country Priest*. In it, the gray gloom of the French provinces is matched by an unrelieved focus on bleakness and cruelty. For Bresson's priest is no cheery, uplifting humanist but instead a man whose youth belies an uncanny ability to penetrate the troubled hearts of parishioners who hardly acknowledge his existence, and whose fierce dedication parallels his own slow death from cancer.

Tone, theme, and point of view aside, Bresson's films, from first to last, trace one of the most disciplined, intricate, and satisfying artistic achievements in the history of the medium. No less than D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Bresson sought to advance the art of the cinema, to create a purely filmic narrative form through a progressive refinement of this young art's tools and strategies—through the mastery, in his words, of “cinematography” over the “cinema.” Like a dutiful student of Rudolf Arnheim and the theory that called for film to free itself from the established arts and discover its “inherent” nature (Galili, 200), Bresson discarded, film by film, the inherited conventions—not only the actor but the dramatic structure of scenes in favor of a series of neutral sequences, often using sound to avoid visual redundancy. This meant not only later renouncing such memorable

performances as those of Renée Faure and Sylvie (Louise Sylvain) in *Angels of the Streets* and Marie Casarès in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, but even L. H. Burel's atmospheric cinematography in *Diary of a Country Priest*, which he came to think was too picturesque. Moreover, the emphasis on precise framing and editing in the films that followed—*A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, and *The Trial of Joan of Arc*—was a move toward an increasingly minimal filmmaking style in which every gesture, every image, every word counted.

For Bresson, getting to the essence of each narrative was synonymous with getting to the essence of the medium. As he himself declared, his films were not made “for a stroll with the eyes, but for going right into, for being totally absorbed in” (*Notes on Cinematography*, 47). So much is this the case that Susan Sontag was moved to characterize the very *watching* of Bresson’s films as an experience requiring a discipline and reflection on the viewer’s part as demanding as the tests of will his protagonists had to endure (32). The reward for such discipline and reflection is the feeling, as Gilbert Adair wrote in *Flickers* (1995) of the Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi, that “his films are among those for whose sake the cinema exists” (121).

## **L’Argent and Other Bresson Films**

One of those films is his last, *L’Argent*, by which time Bresson was probably the oldest active director in the world. But his evolution had been in striking contrast to that of his contemporaries. Even if we do not take into account those filmmakers whose declines had been conspicuous, most of the senior statesmen of the cinema showed in their later phases a serenity of style, an autumnal detachment from reality, which compares with that of elder artists in other genres such as the drama, the novel, and poetry. Not so with Bresson. *L’Argent*, his thirteenth film (freely adapted from Tolstoy’s 1905 novella *The Counterfeit Note*), was made in essentially the same strict, tense, controlled style—here used in the depiction of extraordinary violence—that he used in *Angels of the Streets* in 1943.

Hence, in his “Discourse on Style” (1753), Georges-Louis Leclerc was mistaken: style is not the man himself (Roger, 432), it’s the universe as seen by the man. (Many a disorderly person has been an art-

ist with an orderly style.) But neither is style a separable system into which an artist feeds material. Van Gogh didn't look at the night sky and decide that it would be pretty to paint the constellations as whirls. And Joyce didn't decide it would be clever to describe that same sky as "the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" (698). Neither artist had, in a sense, much choice. His style, of course, was refined through a lifetime and first drafts were not often final drafts, but the temper and vision of that style were given from the start.

Thus it's impossible to imagine Bresson *deciding* to make *L'Argent* as he did. On the basis of his career, we can assume that, at some time after he had read Tolstoy's story, his mind and imagination shaped the structure and look of his film in ways that his mind and imagination had long been doing. It's a kind of fatalism, I believe. Not all fine artists work in the same way all their lives: the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu is one who did not. But some, like Bresson, do.

Consequently you know, if you're familiar with Bresson's *oeuvre*, that *L'Argent* was made with non-actors. Moreover, he instructed his "models" to speak their lines and move their bodies without conscious interpretation or motivation, in a determined attempt on this director's part to keep them from psychologizing their characters. Bresson hated acting and often said so. He chose people instead who had what he considered the right personal qualities for their roles, and he said that he never used people twice because the second time they would try to give him what he wanted in place of what they were. It's as if he were guided by Kleist's line that "Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness at all or an infinite one: that is, in a puppet or in a god" (47). Since Bresson couldn't employ gods, he got as close as possible to puppets—with non-actors. They enact the story of *L'Argent*, as of Bresson's other films, much as medieval townsfolk might have enacted a mystery or morality play, with little skill and much conviction.

Apart from the acting—or non-acting—you also know, if you've seen Bresson's films, that if the subject was contemporary (as it is in *L'Argent*), the sounds of metropolitan life were probably heard under the credits, as if to adumbrate the role that such sound, *any* sound, would play in the film to follow. You recall that the story was told with almost

Trappist austerity and emotional economy, in such an elliptical, fragmentary, even lacunary way that only in its interstices can be found its poetry—indeed, much of its meaning. You recall as well that Bresson's camera fixed on places a moment before characters entered and remained a moment after they left, not only to include environment as a character but also to signify that humans are transient in the world; and you are aware that, in any one of his films, probably a chain of consequences would begin with an event seemingly unrelated to the conclusion.

In our time, when we are saturated more than ever with images of the most superficially realistic kind, particularly on television, Bresson thus tried to wash our eyes and lead us to see differently—to bathe our vision, as it were, in an alternative reality. Moreover, his distrust of words—Bresson's laconic dialogue is almost as characteristic of his work as the neutral tone of its delivery—often made him choose characters (like Mouchette in the 1967 film of the same name, or like the truck driver of *L'Argent*) who have little or no ability to speak, and who therefore suffer their oppression in silence. And often we see as little of them as we hear of their dialogue, for Bresson liked to focus his camera on a door through which a person passed or on a “headless” body approaching a door, turning the knob, and passing through. (His rare moving shots were usually reserved for that kind of traversal.)

When it isn't doorknobs in *L'Argent*, it's cell doors—in prisons that are so clean and well-run, so intensely physical as well as aural, so much a part of society's organization, that they freeze the marrow. (The suggestion, of course, is that humanity itself, inside or outside prison, is trapped behind four walls. Possibly prisons figure so often in Bresson's films—in addition to *L'Argent*, they can be found in *A Man Escaped*, *Pickpocket*, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, and as early as *Angels of the Streets*—and are the most emblematic of his décors, because he himself spent eighteen months in a German P.O.W. camp during World War II.) Bresson thus put places, things, and people on virtually the same plane of importance. Other directors do this, too—Antonioni, for instance. But with Antonioni, it's to show that the physical world is inescapable, almost a person itself; Bresson, by contrast, wanted to show that the world and the things in it are as much a part of God's mind as the people in the world.

## **L'Argent: Money, Money**

Let me address the world of *L'Argent* in a bit more detail, because its pattern is simple yet common in the work of Bresson: a pebble is moved, and the eventual result is an avalanche. A teenaged Parisian from a wealthy home asks his father for extra money, besides his weekly allowance, to repay a debt. The money is refused. The teenager then consults a friend of his age and station, who has counterfeit banknotes (no explanation of the source) and knows where to pass them (no explanation of the knowledge). The youths pass off a false note to a woman in a camera shop. When her husband discovers the fraud, he passes off the note to the driver of an oil-delivery truck. The truck driver is subsequently framed as a passer of counterfeit money and the ensuing scandal causes him to lose his job. In order to continue supporting his family, he tries driving a getaway car for some criminals, but their heist doesn't go so well and he is sent to prison for three years. While incarcerated, his child dies of diphtheria and his wife leaves him. Crazed upon release from jail, the former husband and father turns to theft, violent crime, and eventually cold-blooded murder before turning himself in to the police—for good, as it were.

This seemingly random and ultimately sensationalistic story holds because, as in all of Bresson, the focus is not on the story, it's on matters of which we get only some visible-audible evidence. That is to say, to the devoutly Catholic Bresson, evil is as much a part of life as good, and what happens here en route to God's judgment is not to be taken as proof or disproof of God's being. Though the sentimentalist in Tolstoy (on display in *The Counterfeit Note*) would disagree, God does not prove, does not want to prove, his existence by making the good prosper and the wicked suffer, by aiding the morally weak or rescuing the ethically misled. (The most religious person in the film becomes a murder victim.) This world is, after all, only this world, says *L'Argent*; God alone knows everything, the suffering of the faithful and also the suffering of the sinner.

Bresson's world-view is well conveyed here by his two cinematographers, Emmanuel Machuel and Pasqualino de Santis (the latter of whom had worked for Bresson before). All the colors look pre-Raphaelite, conveying the innocent idea of blue or red or any other color. And this fits Bresson's "innocent" method: violence runs through

*L'Argent* but is never seen. When the truckdriver commits a double murder, for instance, all we see of it is the tap water that runs red in a basin for a few moments as he washes his hands. When he commits ax killings, the only stroke we see occurs when he hits a lamp. This “innocence” extends to the last sequence of the film. The driver, who has killed off a family in an isolated country house, goes to an inn, where he sits and has a cognac. It is then that he turns himself in: by calmly walking over to some policemen standing at the bar and confessing his crimes. In the next shot we are with the crowd outside the inn door. As they watch, the police come out, taking the driver away. We never see him again; instead, the camera places us with the innocent bystanders, who continue to watch the door, watching for more police, more prisoners. But there will be no more, and the film ends on the image of the crowd, waiting and watching—the constant disposition of every moviegoer as well, needless to say, but, even more so, the habitual stance of the audience of any Bresson film, where the emphasis falls on the watching (and the hearing) *while you're waiting*.

The other remarkable aspect of Bresson's *oeuvre*, aside from the consistency of his style, can be deduced from the content of *L'Argent* as summarized above: to wit, forty years after his real beginning in 1943 with *Angels of the Streets*, his films still had the power to create scandal. Even as *Pickpocket* was rejected by many at the time of its release (but hailed by New Wave filmmakers like François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Louis Malle, then making their first films, as a landmark in modern cinema), *L'Argent* was booed by the audience at Cannes in 1983 despite the fact that it won the Grand Prize for creative cinema (together with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*).

The director himself faced a violent reaction when he received the award from Orson Welles—himself no stranger to rejection and scandal. The irony in this instance was that Bresson, the avowed Catholic and a political conservative, was attacked by all the right-wing newspapers in France that in the past had defended his films. At the core of this attack, one can detect an exasperation with, even a hostility toward, an artist whose lack of commercial success had nonetheless never made him sacrifice one iota of his integrity, and who always maintained his rigorous artistic standards.

## In Summa, Bresson

It is sometimes forgotten that part of Bresson's integrity—his moral or ethical rigor, if you will—was his insistence on treating his share of socially as well as linguistically marginalized characters, in such films as *Pickpocket*, *Au hasard*, *Balthazar*, and *Mouchette*. Yet no one would ever have called him a working-class naturalist like Jean-Pierre Dardenne or Luc Dardenne, whose pictures, even though they sometimes have an implicit Christian component (especially *Rosetta* [1999] and *The Son* [2002]), are closer in subject to the social-problem play tradition of the European naturalistic theater. Bresson, by contrast, was a transcendental stylist (to use Paul Schrader's term) concerned to unite the spiritualism of religious cinema with realism's redemption of the physical world in its organic wholeness if not otherness, its inviolable mystery, and its eternal primacy or self-evidence.

From first to last, then, Bresson's films trace one of the most disciplined, intricate, and satisfying artistic achievements in the history of the medium. To be sure, not everyone agrees about Bresson's stature and importance: he did, and does, have his dissenters, certainly among members of the popular press but also among serious critics like Vernon Young, Stanley Kauffmann, and John Simon. You can understand the dissent against Bresson when you consider some critics' comparison of Bresson's style to that of such modernist atonal composers as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Weber, or Olivier Messiaen, at the same time as they point out that, unlike conventional filmmakers, Bresson was working in an intellectual, reflective manner rather than an unreflective, visceral one. Similarly, these critics sometimes pair Bresson and Mark Rothko, whose paintings, with their large canvases of strong color and a minimum of variation, are known for the sparseness if not poverty of their expression—like Bresson's films. To fully understand the dissent against Bresson, however, you also have to remember that his Catholicism, nay, his religiosity itself, was out of step in the existentialist-dominated intellectual climate of 1950s France, even as it was unfashionable in the materialist-obsessed, know-nothing culture of 1980s America.

Still, to see Bresson's films—to see only *L'Argent*, in fact—is to marvel that other directors have had the ingenuity to evolve such elaborate styles and yet restrict them to superficial messages. It might even

be said that watching a Bresson film is to risk conversion *away* from the cinema. His meaning is so clearly inspirational, and his treatment so remorselessly interior, that he shames the extrinsic glamour and extravagance of so many movies. Shame on them, and God bless him.

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## Filmography: Key Examples of Transcendental or Spiritual Style in the Cinema

*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), directed by Carl-Theodor Dreyer

*Day of Wrath* (1943), directed by Carl-Theodor Dreyer

*Late Spring* (1949), directed by Yasujiro Ozu

*Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), directed by Robert Bresson

*Europe '51* (1952), directed by Roberto Rossellini

*Tokyo Story* (1953), directed by Yasujiro Ozu

*La strada* (1954), directed by Federico Fellini

*Early Spring* (1956), directed by Yasujiro Ozu

*A Man Escaped* (1956), directed by Robert Bresson

*Pickpocket* (1959), directed by Robert Bresson

*Late Autumn* (1960), directed by Yasujiro Ozu

*The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), directed by Robert Bresson

*An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), directed by Yasujiro Ozu

*Gertrud* (1964), directed by Carl-Theodor Dreyer

*Au hasard, Balthazar (By Chance, Balthazar*, 1966), directed by Robert Bresson

*Mouquette* (1967), directed by Robert Bresson

*Thérèse* (1986), directed by Alain Cavalier

*Mystery Train* (1989), directed by Jim Jarmusch  
*A Tale of Winter* (1992), directed by Éric Rohmer  
*Raining Stones* (1993), directed by Ken Loach  
*A Single Girl* (1995), directed by Benoît Jacquot  
*Maborosi* (1995), directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda  
*The Straight Story* (1999), directed by David Lynch  
*Rosetta* (1999), directed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne  
*Under the Sand* (2000), directed by François Ozon  
*What Time Is It There?* (2001), directed by Tsai Ming-liang  
*3-Iron* (2004), directed by Kim Ki-duk  
*Keane* (2004), directed by Lodge Kerrigan  
*L'Enfant* (2005), directed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne  
*The Silence of Lorna* (2008), directed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc  
Dardenne

# Film Credits and Directors' Feature Filmographies

## *Nosferatu* (1922)

Director: F. W. Murnau

Screenplay: Henrik Galeen, from the 1897 novel *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker

Cinematographers: Fritz Arno Wagner, Günther Krampf

Editor: F. W. Murnau

Music: Hans Erdmann

Art Director: Albin Grau

Costume Designer: Albin Grau

Running time: 81 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white; silent

Cast: Max Schreck (Count Orlok, Nosferatu the Vampire), Alexander Granach (Knock, Estate Agent), Gustav von Wangenheim (Hutter, Knock's Assistant), Greta Schroeder (Ellen, Hutter's Wife), G. H. Schnell (Harding, Shipbuilder), Ruth Landshoff (Annie, Harding's Wife), Gustav Botz (Professor Sievers), Max Nemetz (Captain of the Ship *Demeter*), John Gottowt (Professor Bulwer), Wolfgang Heinz (Sailor 1), Albert Venohr (Sailor 2), Eric van Viele (Sailor 3), Karl Etlinger (Checker on the wharf), Guido Herzfeld (Innkeeper), Hans Lanser-Rudolf (Magistrate), Loni Nest (Child at window), Josef Sareny (Head coachman), Fanny Schreck (Nurse), Hardy von Francois (Doctor), Heinrich Witte (Warden of the insane asylum)

## **F. W. Murnau (1888-1931)**

*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922)

*The Last Laugh* (1924)

*Tartuffe* (1925)

*Faust* (1926)

*Sunrise* (1927)

*Tabu* (1931)

## **Greed (1924)**

Director: Erich von Stroheim

Screenplay: Erich von Stroheim & June Mathis, from the 1899 novel *McTeague*, by Frank Norris

Cinematographers: William H. Daniels, Ben F. Reynolds, Ernest B. Schoedsack

Editors: Frank E. Hull, Joseph Farnham, Rex Ingram, Grant Whytock; Glenn Morgan (1999)

Music: James Brennan, Jack Brennan (later versions: Carl Davis, 1986; Robert Israel, 1999)

Production Designers: Richard Day, Cedric Gibbons

Running time: 180 minutes, cut to 135 minutes by the studio; a 109-minute version also exists (originally seven-to-nine hours, but Stroheim was initially forced to edit the film into a four-hour version)  
Format: 35mm, black and white; silent

Cast: Jack Curtis (McTeague, Sr., Shift Boss at the Big Dipper Mine), Tempé Piggot (Mother McTeague), Gibson Gowland (McTeague, the Son/Doc McTeague), Günther von Ritzau (Dr. "Painless" Potter), Florence Gibson (Hag), Jean Hersholt (Marcus Schouler), Chester Conklin ("Popper" Sieppe), Sylvia Ashton ("Mommer" Sieppe), Zasu Pitts (Trina), Austin Jewell ("Owgoost" Sieppe), Oscar and Otto Gotell ("Der Tervins," the twin Sieppe brothers), Joan Standing (Selina), Frank Hayes (Charles W. Grannis), Fanny Midgley (Miss Anastasia Baker), Max Tyron (Uncle Rudolph Oelbermann), Hughie Mack (Mr. Heise, the Harness Maker), Tiny Jones (Mrs. Heise), J. Aldrich Libbey (Mr. Ryer), Rita Revela (Mrs. Ryer), Dale Fuller (Maria Miranda Macapa, a Scrubwoman), Cesare Gravina (Zerkow, a Junkman), Lon Poff (Lottery Agent), S. S. Simon (Joe Frenna, the Saloon Keeper), William Mollenheimer (The Palmist), Hugh J. McCauley (The Photographer), Jack McDonald (Placer County Sheriff), James Gibson (Deputy Sheriff), William Barlow (The Minister), James F. Fulton (Cribbens, a Prospector), Lillian Lawrence (Gossip), Erich von Stroheim (Balloon Vendor), James Wang (Chinese Cook), Lita Chevrier, Gwendolynne D'Amour, Edward Gaffney, Bee Ho Gray, Harold Henderson, Alexander Rose

### **Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)**

*Blind Husbands* (1919)  
*The Devil's Passkey* (1920)  
*Foolish Wives* (1922)  
*Merry-Go-Round* (1923)  
*Greed* (1924)  
*The Merry Widow* (1925)  
*The Wedding March* (1928)  
*Queen Kelly* (1929)  
*Hello, Sister!* (1933)

### ***L'Âge d'or* (1930)**

Director: Luis Buñuel  
Screenplay: Luis Buñuel & Salvador Dalí  
Cinematographer: Albert Duverger  
Editor: Luis Buñuel  
Music: Van Parys; montage of extracts from Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Debussy, and Wagner  
Production Designer: Pierre Schilzneck  
Running time: 63 minutes  
Format: 35mm, black and white; silent  
Cast: Lya Lys (The Woman), Gaston Modot (The Man), Max Ernst (Bandit Chief), Pierre Prévert (Péman, a Bandit), Caridad de Labardesque, Germaine Noizet, Josep Llorens Artigas, Duchange, Bonaventura Ibáñez, Jean Aurenche, Lionel Salem, Pancho Cossio, Valentine Hugo, Marie Berthe Ernst, Jacques B. Brunius, Simone Cottance, Paul Éluard, Manuel Ángeles Ortiz, Juan Esplandiú, Pedro Flores, Jean Castanier, Juan Castaño, Joaquín Roa, Domingo Pruna, Xaume de Maravilles, Claude Heymann, Jean Paul Le Chanois, Marval, Juan Ramón Masoliver, Jaume Miravitles, Jaime Otero, Joaquín Peinado, Roland Penrose, Valentine Penrose, Jacques Prévert, Raymond de Sarka

### **Luis Buñuel (1900-83)**

*Un Chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1928)  
*L'Âge d'or* (*The Golden Age*, 1930)  
*Land without Bread* (1933)

*Gran Casino* (1946)  
*The Great Madcap* (1949)  
*Los olvidados* (*The Forgotten*, 1950)  
*The Devil and the Flesh*, a.k.a. *Susana* (1950)  
*The Daughter of Deceit* (1951)  
*A Woman without Love* (1951)  
*Stairway to Heaven*, a.k.a. *Mexican Bus Ride* (1951)  
*The Brute* (1952)  
*Él* (*This Strange Passion*, 1953)  
*Illusion Travels by Streetcar* (1954)  
*Wuthering Heights* (*Abismos de passion*, 1954)  
*Robinson Crusoe* (1954)  
*River of Death* (1955)  
*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955)  
*That Is the Dawn* (1955)  
*Death in the Garden* (1956)  
*Nazarín* (1959)  
*Fever Mounts at El Pao* (1959)  
*The Young One* (1960)  
*Viridiana* (1961)  
*The Exterminating Angel* (1962)  
*The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964)  
*Simon of the Desert* (1965)  
*Belle de jour* (*Beauty of the Day*, 1967)  
*The Milky Way* (1969)  
*Tristana* (1970)  
*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)  
*The Phantom of Liberty* (1974)  
*That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977)

### ***Day of Wrath* (1943)**

Director: Carl-Theodor Dreyer

Screenplay: Carl-Theodor Dreyer, Poul Knudsen, Paul La Cour, & Mogens Skot-Hansen, from the 1908 play *Anne Pedersdotter*, by Hans Wiers-Jenssens

Cinematographer: Karl Andersson

Editors: Anne Marie Petersen, Edith Schlüssel

Music: Poul Schierbeck

Art Director: Erik Aaes

Costume Designers: Karl Sandt Jensen, Olga Thomsen

Running time: 97 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Thorkild Roose (Rev. Absalon Pederssøn), Preben Lerdorff Rye (Martin, Absalon's son from his first marriage), Lisbeth Movin (Anne Pedersdotter, Absalon's second wife), Preben Neergaard (Degrn), Sigrid Neiiendam (Merete, Absalon's mother), Anna Svierkier (Herlofs Marte), Olaf Ussing (Laurentius), Albert Høeberg (The bishop)

### **Carl-Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968)**

*The President* (1919)

*The Parson's Widow* (1920)

*Leaves from Satan's Book* (1921)

*Love One Another* (1922)

*Once Upon a Time* (1922)

*Michael* (1924)

*Master of the House*, a.k.a. *Thou Shalt Honor Thy Wife* (1925)

*The Bride of Glomdal* (1926)

*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

*Vampyr* (1932)

*Day of Wrath* (1943)

*Two People* (1945)

*The Word* (1955)

*Gertrud* (1964)

### ***The Seven Samurai* (1954)**

Director: Akira Kurosawa

Screenplay: Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, & Hideo Oguni

Cinematographer: Asakazu Nakai

Editor: Akira Kurosawa

Music: Fumio Hayasaka

Production Designer: Takashi Matsuyama

Costume Designers: Kôhei Ezaki, Mieko Yamaguchi

Running time: 207 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Toshiro Mifune (Kikuchiyo), Takashi Shimura (Kanbē Shimada), Keiko Tsushima (Shino), Yukiko Shimazaki (Rikichi's Wife), Kamatari Fujiwara (Manzō, Father of Shino), Daisuke Katō (Shichirōji), Isao Kimura (Katsushirō Okamoto), Minoru Chiaki (Heihachi Hayashida), Seiji Miyaguchi (Kyūzō), Yoshio Kosugi (Mosuke), Bokuzen Hidari (Yohei), Yoshio Inaba (Gorobē Katayama), Yoshio Tsuchiya (Riki-chi), Kokuten Kōdō (Gisaku, the Old Man), Eijirō Tōno (Kidnapper), Kichijirō Ueda (Captured Bandit Scout), Keiji Sakakida (Gosaku), Shinpei Takagi (Bandit Chief), Shin Ōtomo (Bandit Second-in-Command), Hiroshi Sugi (Tea Shop Owner)

### **Akira Kurosawa (1910-98)**

*Sanshiro Sugata* (1943)

*The Most Beautiful* (1944)

*Sanshiro Sugata, Part II* (1945)

*The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (1945)

*Those Who Make Tomorrow* (1946)

*No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946)

*One Wonderful Sunday* (1947)

*Drunken Angel* (1948)

*The Quiet Duel* (1949)

*Stray Dog* (1949)

*Rashomon* (1950)

*The Idiot* (1951)

*The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (1952)

*Ikiru*, a.k.a. *To Live* (1952)

*Seven Samurai* (1954)

*Record of a Living Being*, a.k.a. *I Live in Fear* (1955)

*Throne of Blood* (1957)

*The Lower Depths* (1957)

*The Hidden Fortress* (1958)

*The Bad Sleep Well* (1960)

*Yojimbo* (*The Bodyguard*, 1961)

*Sanjuro* (1962)

*High and Low* (1963)  
*Red Beard* (1965)  
*Dodeskaden* (1970)  
*Dersu Uzala* (1975)  
*Kagemusha*, a.k.a. *The Shadow Warrior* (1980)  
*Ran (Revolt)*, 1985  
*Dreams* (1990)  
*Rhapsody in August* (1991)  
*No, Not Yet!* (1993)

### ***Miracle in Milan* (1951)**

Director: Vittorio De Sica

Screenplay: Cesare Zavattini, Vittorio De Sica, Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Mario Chiari, & Adolfo Franci, based on the story by Zavattini taken from his novel *Totò the Good* (1943)

Cinematographer: G. R. Aldo (a.k.a. Aldo Graziati)

Editor: Eraldo Da Roma

Music: Alessandro Cicognini

Production Designer: Guido Fiorini

Costume Designer: Mario Chiari

Running time: 100 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Emma Gramatica (Lolotta, the old woman), Francesco Golisano (Totò), Gianni Branduani (Totò at age eleven), Paolo Stoppa (Rappi, the villain), Guglielmo Barnabò (Mobbi, the rich man), Brunella Bovo (Edvige), Anna Carena (Marta, the proud lady), Alba Arnova (The statue), Virgilio Riento (Sgt. Riento), Arturo Bragaglia (Alfredo), Erminio Spalla (Gaetano), Riccardo Bertazzolo (The wrestler), Flora Cambi (Unhappy girl in love), Angelo Prioli (First singing policeman), Francesco "Checco" Rissone (Second singing policeman), Jubal Schembri (The man with the bald head), Walter Scherer (Arturo), Jerome Johnson (The colored man), Egisto Olivieri (Mobbi's lawyer), Giuseppe Berardi (Giuseppe), Renato Navarrini (The stutterer), Enzo Furlai (Brambi, the landowner), Luigi Ponzoni, Piero Salonne, Giuseppe Spalla, Leonfi Trivaldi, and the squatters of Milan

## **Vittorio De Sica (1901-74)**

*Red Roses* (1939)  
*Maddalena, Zero for Conduct* (1940)  
*Teresa Venerdì*, a.k.a. *Doctor Beware* (1941)  
*A Garibaldian in the Convent* (1942)  
*The Children Are Watching Us* (1943)  
*The Gate of Heaven* (1946)  
*Shoeshine* (1947)  
*Bicycle Thieves* (1948)  
*Miracle in Milan* (1951)  
*Umberto D.* (1952)  
*It Happened in the Park* (1953)  
*Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953)  
*The Gold of Naples* (1954)  
*The Roof* (1956)  
*Anna of Brooklyn* (1958)  
*Two Women* (1961)  
*The Last Judgment* (1961)  
*Boccaccio '70* (1962)  
*The Condemned of Altona* (1962)  
*Il Boom* (1963)  
*Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1963)  
*Marriage Italian Style* (1964)  
*A New World* (1966)  
*After the Fox* (1966)  
*Woman Times Seven* (1967)  
*A Place for Lovers* (1968)  
*Sunflower* (1970)  
*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1971)  
*We'll Call Him Andrew* (1972)  
*A Brief Vacation* (1973)  
*The Voyage* (1974)

## ***On the Waterfront* (1954)**

Director: Elia Kazan

Screenplay: Budd Schulberg, suggested by articles in the twenty-four-part series “Crime on the Waterfront,” written by Malcolm Johnson and published in the *New York Sun* in 1948

Cinematographer: Boris Kaufman

Editor: Gene Milford

Music: Leonard Bernstein

Art Director: Richard Day

Costume Designer: Anna Hill Johnstone

Running time: 108 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Marlon Brando (Terry Malloy), Eva Marie Saint (Edie Doyle), Karl Malden (Father Barry), Lee J. Cobb (Johnny Friendly, a.k.a. Michael J. Skelly), Rod Steiger (Charley “the Gent” Malloy), John Hamilton (“Pop” Doyle), Pat Henning (“Kayo” Dugan), James Westerfield (Big Mac), Leif Erickson (Glover), Tony Galento (Truck), Tami Mauriello (Tillio), John Heldabrand (Mott), Rudy Bond (Moose), Don Blackman (Luke), Arthur Keegan (Jimmy), Abe Simon (Barney), Martin Balsam (Gillette), Fred Gwynne (Slim), Thomas Handley (Tommy Collins), Anne Hegira (Mrs. Collins), Pat Hingle (Jocko), Zachary Charles (Dues collector), Dan Bergin (Sidney), Barry Macollum (Johnny’s banker), Mike O’Dowd (Specs), Nehemiah Persoff (Cab driver)

## **Elia Kazan (1909-2003)**

*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945)

*Boomerang!* (1947)

*Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947)

*Pinky* (1949)

*Panic in the Streets* (1950)

*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)

*Viva Zapata!* (1952)

*On the Waterfront* (1954)

*East of Eden* (1955)

*Baby Doll* (1956)

*A Face in the Crowd* (1957)

*Wild River* (1960)

*Splendor in the Grass* (1961)

*The Last Tycoon* (1976)

### ***Room at the Top* (1959)**

Director: Jack Clayton

Screenplay: Neil Paterson, from the 1957 novel of the same name by John Braine

Cinematographer: Freddie Francis

Editor: Ralph Kemplen

Music: Mario Nascimbene

Production Designer: Ralph Brinton

Running time: 115 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Simone Signoret (Alice Aisgill), Laurence Harvey (Joe Lampton), Heather Sears (Susan Brown), Donald Wolfit (Mr. Brown), Donald Houston (Charles Soames), Hermione Baddeley (Elspeth), Allan Cuthbertson (George Aisgill), Raymond Huntley (Mr. Hoylake), John Westbrook (Jack Wales), Ambrosine Phillipotts (Mrs. Brown), Richard Pasco (Teddy), Beatrice Varley (Aunt), Delena Kidd (Eva), Ian Hendry (Cyril), April Olrich (Mavis), Mary Peach (June Samson), Anthony Newlands (Bernard), Avril Elgar (Miss Gilchrist), Thelma Ruby (Miss Breith), Paul Whitsun-Jones (Laughing man at bar), Derren Nesbitt (Thug in fight on tow path)

### **Jack Clayton (1921-95)**

*Room at the Top* (1959)

*The Innocents* (1961)

*The Pumpkin Eater* (1964)

*Our Mother's House* (1967)

*The Great Gatsby* (1974)

*Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983)

*The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1987)

### ***Sundays and Cybèle* (1962)**

Director: Serge Bourguignon

Screenplay: Serge Bourguignon & Antoine Tudal, from the 1958 novel *Les dimanches de Ville-d'Avray* (*The Sundays of Ville-d'Avray*), by Bernard Eschassériaux

Cinematographer: Henri Decaë

Editor: Léonide Azar

Music: Maurice Jarre, Tomaso Albinoni, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Georg Friedrich Händel, Ottorino Respighi

Production Designer: Bernard Evein

Costume Designers: Marie-Claude Fouquet, Jacques Heim

Running time: 110 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Hardy Krüger (Pierre), Nicole Courcel (Madeleine), Patricia Gozzi (Françoise/Cybèle), Daniel Ivernel (Carlos), André Oumansky (Bernard), Anne-Marie Coffinet (Françoise II), René Clermont (Postman), Malka Ribowska (Clairvoyant), Michel de Ré (Fiacre), France Anglade (Lulu), Paul Bonifas (Grocer), Renée Duchateau (Grocer's wife), Serge Bourguignon (Horseman), Alain Bouvette (Station employee), Gilbert Edard (Father of Françoise/Cybèle), Martine Ferrière (A mother), Albert Hugues (Café owner), Maurice Garrel (Policeman), Lisette Lebon (Monique), Jocelyne Loiseau (Sister Mary), Denise Péron (Sister Opportune), Bibiane Stern (Carmela), Antoine Tudal (Painter), Jacques Robiolles, Florence Blot, Dominique Maurin, Pierre Mirat, Jacques Prévot, Raymond Pélissier, Jacques Tessier, Roger Trapp

### **Serge Bourguignon (born 1928)**

*Sundays and Cybèle* (1962)

*The Reward* (1965)

*Two Weeks in September* (1967)

*The Picasso Summer* (1969)

### ***Closely Watched Trains* (1966)**

Director: Jiří Menzel

Screenplay: Jiří Menzel & Bohumil Hrabal, from Hrabal's 1965 novel of the same name

Cinematographer: Jaromír Sofr  
Editor: Jiřína Lukešová  
Music: Jiří Šust  
Art Director: Oldřich Bosák  
Costume Designer: Olga Dimitrovová  
Running time: 93 minutes  
Format: 35mm, black and white  
Cast: Václav Neckář (Miloš Hrma), Vlastimil Brodský (Councilor Zedníček), Jitka Bendová (Conductress Máša), Josef Somr (Train dispatcher Hubička), Vladimír Valenta (Stationmaster Max), Libuše Havelková (Stationmaster's wife), Jitka Zelenohorská (Telegraphist Zdenička), Nada Urbánková (Viktoria Freie), Jiří Menzel (Dr. Brabec), Alois Vachek (Novák, the station porter), Ferdinand Kruta (Máša's uncle), Countess (Květa Fialová)

### **Jiří Menzel (born 1938)**

*Crime at a Girls' School* (1965)  
*Closely Watched Trains* (1966)  
*Capricious Summer* (1967)  
*Crime in a Nightclub* (1968)  
*Larks on a String* (1969)  
*My Sweet Little Village* (1985)  
*The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (1993)  
*I Served the King of England* (2006)  
*The Don Juans* (2013)

### ***The Graduate* (1967)**

Director: Mike Nichols  
Screenplay: Calder Willingham & Buck Henry, from the 1963 novel of the same name by Charles Webb  
Cinematographer: Robert Surtees  
Editor: Sam O'Steen  
Music: Dave Grusin, Paul Simon, Art Garfunkel  
Production Designer: Richard Sylbert  
Costume Designer: Patricia Zipprodt  
Running time: 106 minutes.

Format: 35mm, color

Cast: Anne Bancroft (Mrs. Robinson), Dustin Hoffman (Benjamin Braddock), Katharine Ross (Elaine Robinson), William Daniels (Mr. Braddock), Murray Hamilton (Mr. Robinson), Elizabeth Wilson (Mrs. Braddock), Buck Henry (Room Clerk), Walter Brooke (Mr. McGuire), Brian Avery (Carl Smith), Norman Fell (Mr. McCleery), Marion Lorne (Miss DeWitte), Alice Ghostley (Mrs. Singleman), Jonathan Hole (Mr. Singleman), Robert P. Lieb (Party Guest), Ed-dra Gale (Woman on Bus), Mike Farrell (Bellhop in Hotel Lobby), Buddy Douglas (Bellhop in Hotel Lobby), Lainie Miller (Night Club Stripper), Richard Dreyfuss (Boarding House Resident), Ben Murphy (Shaving Student), Kevin Tighe (Student in Shower), Eve McVeagh (Party Guest), Elisabeth Fraser (Second Lady), Donald F. Glut (College Student), Elaine May (Girl with Note for Benjamin), William H. O'Brien (Hotel Guest), Hal Taggart (Hotel Guest), Frank Baker (Hotel Guest), Arthur Tovey (Hotel Guest), Hamilton Camp (Second Room Clerk), Noam Pitlik (Gas Station Attendant), David Westberg (Valet Parker), Harry Holcombe (The Minister), George Bruggeman (Church Member)

### **Mike Nichols (1931-2014)**

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966)

*The Graduate* (1967)

*Teach Me!* (short, 1968)

*Catch-22* (1970)

*Carnal Knowledge* (1971)

*The Day of the Dolphin* (1973)

*The Fortune* (1975)

*Gilda Live* (documentary, 1980)

*Silkwood* (1983)

*Heartburn* (1986)

*Biloxi Blues* (1988)

*Working Girl* (1988)

*Postcards from the Edge* (1990)

*Regarding Henry* (1991)

*Wolf* (1994)

*The Birdcage* (1996)  
*Primary Colors* (1998)  
*What Planet Are You From?* (2000)  
*Wit* (2001)  
*Angels in America* (2003)  
*Closer* (2004)  
*Charlie Wilson's War* (2007)

### ***Love* (1971)**

Director: Károly Makk

Screenplay: Péter Bacsó & Tibor Déry, from two stories by Déry:  
“Szerelem” (“Love,” 1956) and “Két asszony” (“Two Women,” 1962)

Cinematographer: János Tóth

Editor: György Sívó

Music: András Mihály

Production Designer: József Romvári

Costume Designer: Piroska Katona

Running time: 84 minutes

Format: 35mm, black and white

Cast: Lili Darvas (The old woman), Mari Törőcsik (Luca), Iván Darvas (János), Erzsi Orsolya (Irén), László Mensáros (The doctor), Tibor Bitskey (Feri), András Ambrus (Börtönőr), József Almási (Tanár), Zoltán Bán (Borbély)

### **Károly Makk (1925-2017)**

*Lily Boy* (1954)

*Ward No. 9* (1955)

*Mese a 12 találatról* (*One Month: 12 Results Found*, 1957)

*The House under the Rocks* (1958)

*Füre lépni szabad* (*You Can Go Free*, 1960)

*The Obsessed Ones* (1962)

*Lost Paradise* (1962)

*The Last But One* (1963)

*Where Was Your Majesty Between 3 and 5?* (1964)

*A Cloudless Vacation* (1968)

*Before God and Man* (1968)

*Love* (1971)  
*Cats' Play* (1972)  
*A Very Moral Night* (1977)  
*Drága kisfiam* (*My Dear Boy*, 1978)  
*Philemon és Baucis* (*Philemon and Baucis*, 1978)  
*Két történet a félmultból* (*Two Stories from Half-Past*, 1980)  
*Behind the Brick Wall* (1980)  
*Another Way* (1982)  
*Deadly Game* (1982)  
*Lily in Love* (1984)  
*The Last Manuscript* (1987)  
*Hungarian Requiem* (1990)  
*A Vörös bestia* (*The Red Beast*, 1995)  
*The Gambler* (1997)  
*A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda* (2003)  
*As You Are* (2010)

***The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978)**

Director: Fred Schepisi

Screenplay: Fred Schepisi, from the 1972 novel of the same name by Thomas Keneally

Cinematographer: Ian Baker

Editor: Brian Kavanagh

Music: Bruce Smeaton

Production Designer: Wendy Dickson

Costume Designer: Bruce Finlayson

Running time: 108 minutes

Format: 35mm, color

Cast: Tommy Lewis (Jimmie Blacksmith), Freddy Reynolds (Mort Blacksmith), Ray Barrett (Farrell), Jack Thompson (Reverend Neville), Angela Punch (Gilda Marshall), Steve Dodds (Tabidgi), Peter Carroll (McCready), Ruth Cracknell (Mrs. Heather Newby), Don Crosby (Jack Newby)

### **Fred Schepisi (born 1939)**

*The Devil's Playground* (1976)  
*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978)  
*Barbarosa* (1982)  
*Roxanne* (1987)  
*A Cry in the Dark* (1988)  
*The Russia House* (1990)  
*Six Degrees of Separation* (1993)  
*The Eye of the Storm* (2011)  
*Words and Pictures* (2013)  
*Andorra* (2018)

### **Lola (FRG 2, 1981)**

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
Screenplay: Peter Märthesheimer, Pea Fröhlich, & Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
Cinematographer: Xaver Schwarzenberger  
Editors: Juliane Lorenz, Franz Walsch  
Music: Peer Raben  
Production Designer: Rolf Zehetbauer  
Costume Designer: Barbara Baum  
Running time: 113 minutes  
Format: 35mm, color  
Cast: Barbara Sukowa (Lola), Armin Mueller-Stahl (von Bohm), Mario Adorf (Schuckert), Matthias Fuchs (Esslin), Helga Feddersen (Mrs. Hettich), Karin Baal (Lola's mother), Ivan Desny (Wittich), Elisabeth Volkmann (Gigi), Hark Bohm (Völker), Karl-Heinz von Hassel (Timmerding), Rosal Zech (Mrs. Schuckert)

### **Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-82)**

*Love Is Colder than Death* (1969)  
*Katzelmacher* (1969)  
*The American Soldier* (1971)  
*Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971)  
*The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971)  
*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972)

*Jail Bait* (1973)  
*World on a Wire* (1973)  
*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973)  
*Martha* (1974)  
*Effi Briest* (1974)  
*Like a Bird on the Wire* (1975)  
*Fox and His Friends* (1975)  
*Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975)  
*Fear of Fear* (1975)  
*I Only Want You to Love Me* (1976)  
*Satan's Brew* (1976)  
*Chinese Roulette* (1976)  
*The Stationmaster's Wife* (1977)  
*Despair* (1978)  
*In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978)  
*The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979)  
*The Third Generation* (1979)  
*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980)  
*Lili Marleen* (1981)  
*Lola* (1981)  
*Veronika Voss* (1982)  
*Querelle* (1982)

### ***L'Argent (Money, 1983)***

Director: Robert Bresson

Screenplay: Robert Bresson, from the 1905 novella *The Counterfeit Note*, by Leo Tolstoy

Cinematographers: Pasqualino de Santis, Emmanuel Machuel

Editor: Jean-François Naudon

Music: Johann Sebastian Bach

Production Designer: Pierre Guffroy

Running time: 85 minutes

Format: 35mm, color

Cast: Christian Patey (Yvon Targe), Vincent Risterucci (Lucien), Caroline Lang (Elise), Sylvie Van den Elsen (Gray-haired woman), Michel Briguet (Gray-haired woman's father), Béatrice Tabourin (Woman in

the photography shop), Didier Baussy (Man in the photography shop), Marc-Ernest Fourneau (Norbert), Bruno Lapeyre (Martial), Jeanne Aptekman (Yvette), André Cler (Norbert's father), Claude Cher (Norbert's mother), François-Marie Banier (Yvon's cellmate), Alain Aptekman, Dominique Mullier, Jacques Behr, Gilles Durieux

**Robert Bresson (1901-99)**

*Angels of the Streets* (1943)

*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*, 1945)

*Diary of a Country Priest* (1951)

*A Man Escaped* (1956)

*Pickpocket* (1959)

*The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962)

*Au hasard, Balthazar* (*By Chance, Balthazar*, 1966)

*Mouchette* (1967)

*A Gentle Creature* (1969)

*Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971)

*Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974)

*The Devil Probably* (1977)

*L'Argent* (*Money*, 1983)



# A Guide to Film Analysis

Many of us are used to sitting back in the dark and viewing a film uncritically; indeed, most Hollywood films are constructed so as to render “invisible” the carefully constructed (or edited) nature of the medium. Furthermore, because a film is composed of visual, aural, and linguistic components that are manipulated in numerous ways, it is a challenge to take apart the totality of the film experience and to interpret how that experience was assembled—and *why* it was assembled in a particular way.

In the paragraphs to come the reader will find brief explanations of ways in which to analyze the language of film. Although this list is not comprehensive, it does contain a lot of information. If film interpretation is new to the reader, he or she will not be able to keep track of all of these elements while viewing any one film—this is an acquired skill. One should concentrate at first on a few aspects that seem to offer the most opportunity for critical reading.

If one is viewing the film only once, one should try to take notes in shorthand while watching. Arrows can be used to note camera angles and camera movement; quick sketches can be used to note shot composition and elements of the *mise-en-scène*. As soon as possible after viewing the film, one should write out one’s impressions, noting the most important elements. If one intends to write about the film and will be seeing it again, one should take minimal notes the first time

through (at the same time as one registers important scenes to which one wants to return).

When analyzing a film as a historical document, one should keep in mind the film's contemporary audience and author-director. One's own personal reaction to the film may serve as a starting point, but one needs to convert this reaction into historical analysis—i.e., how is the viewer different from, yet similar to, the historical audience/author-director? What has changed and what has stayed the same? One should also remember the technological changes that have taken place over the years: one should keep in mind what audiences would have expected at the time and how filmmakers once used the technology at their disposal.

It is especially important to consider substantial changes in the manner of presentation if one will be watching the film on a television set. One should be aware that most Hollywood films made after the early 1950s have an “aspect ratio” (height and width ratio) different from that of television screens. Most videotapes of these films have been altered by the “pan and scan” method, which dramatically changes elements such as shot composition and camera movement. Videotapes that are “widescreen” preserve the correct aspect ratio. Most DVDs now come in both “standard” (altered) and “widescreen” format, or only in the correct aspect ratio, and most laser disks use the correct aspect ratio. If possible, one should find a format that has not altered the aspect ratio.

## Digging Deeper: Levels of Meaning

Movies are entertainment. Movies are documents of their time and place. Movies are artistic forms of self-expression. Movies we see at theaters, on television, or at home are typically *narrative* films. They tell stories about characters going through experiences. But what are they really about? What is the *content* of a film?

Recounting the plot of a movie, telling what happens, is the simplest way to explain it to someone else. But this is neither a film *review* nor a film *analysis*. It is merely a synopsis with which anyone else who sees or has seen the movie will likely agree. This level of content may be called the *referential*, since it refers directly to events that occur in the

story and possibly to some aspects of the story that are merely implied. Most films, however, can be analyzed more thoroughly to reveal deeper levels of meaning.

A *review* (ca. 400-1,200 words) typically includes personal impressions and evaluations of a movie's content and techniques. A good review may be highly subjective yet still touch on topics that might be explored in more detail in a longer, formal analysis. An *analysis* (ca. 1,200-7,500 words) attempts to determine how the film uses various cinematic techniques and elements of film form or narrative strategy to make viewers react in a certain way, and tries, finally, to discover why the film makes viewers come away with certain opinions about it. Serious criticism, whether essays written for magazines, journals, books, or class assignments, attempts to analyze films rather than merely review them or provide simple descriptions of what happens. An analysis requires some reflective thought about the film, and usually benefits from multiple viewings as well as outside research.

Most films include lines of dialogue and obvious developments of character that explicitly communicate meaning to the viewers. *Explicit* content is perhaps some sort of "moral of the story" or sociopolitical attitude that the filmmaker is expressing directly through the mouths and actions of the characters. A slightly deeper level of interpretation is *implicit* (or subtextual) content, which may be less obvious but can still be inferred from seeing how the characters change, grow, or develop in the course of the film. Issues and ideas dealing with general human relations (rather than those specific to individual characters) may be fairly easy to recognize but are not explicitly stated by the characters. Moreover, different viewers might interpret the same action or event in different ways, depending upon their own experiences and expectations.

Implicit, explicit, and referential interpretations are based entirely on the film as a self-contained work, on "internal evidence." It is also possible to find richer meaning in a film, meaning deduced from knowing something about its creators and the time and place in which it was created—meaning deduced, that is, from "external evidence" that is not possible to identify exclusively from the film itself. Sometimes this type of meaning is intentional on the part of the filmmakers, and at other times it may be unconsciously incorporated into the story.

Analyzing a film on this level is an instance of treating the film as a *symptom* of a much greater influence than the simple dramatic concerns, on the part of the director and screenwriter, for the characters and their actions. A *symptomatic* interpretation looks at the film as part of the broad context of society, reflecting and illustrating themes prevalent in the culture, in the time and place it was made, and possibly in the creator's personal experience. This level of interpretation tries to recognize symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as *metaphors* for something else, or possibly seeing the entire story as an *allegory* about something else.

## **Figuring It All Out: Approaches to Interpretation**

Identifying the film's content, whether explicit, implicit, or symptomatic, is an interpretation of its *ideational* meaning. It is up to viewers and critics to determine whether a film is effective at achieving some or all of its intentions, and sometimes even what those intentions might be. Analysis from a variety of approaches—all of them ultimately capped by a humanistic perspective, as opposed to an ideologically politicized one (feminist, Marxist or class-based, postcolonial, racial, homosexual, etc.)—can help a viewer realize just what a film is trying to do and to appreciate it more, whether or not it suits one's taste.

Once people realized that the cinema could do much more than provide simple entertainment, a variety of theories and approaches were developed to help analyze films in order to understand how they created responses in viewers and just what their narratives might ultimately mean. Different approaches examine different aspects of a film for different reasons.

A *formalist* approach looks at the film itself, its structure or form. Thus, while other approaches might use some degree of external evidence to analyze a film, a formalist approach will focus primarily on internal evidence. This approach might analyze how the way in which the narrative is presented forces the viewer to see things at certain times, and in such a way, that his reaction to them would be different if they were presented some other way. A *narrative* analysis will examine how a film employs various narrative elements (such as character, setting, repetition/variation, chronological structure, etc.) to convey

meaning to the viewer. Analysis of specific formal *techniques* might concentrate on a film's use of *mise-en-scène*, photographic composition, camera movement, editing choice, sound in relation to the image, etc., noting the effect of those techniques on the viewer's perception of a scene and interpretation of what it may mean.

A *realist* approach examines how a film represents "reality." Some films attempt to make techniques "invisible" to viewers so that realistic characters and situations are always the primary focus. Others attempt to use cinematic techniques to create a certain type of intense psychological reality that the filmmaker wants the audience to experience—love, aging, insanity, drug addiction, etc. Some films are thus more concerned with creating emotional moods and impressions than with depicting a traditionally plotted story with an obvious beginning, middle, and end. These films may be attempting to convey a type of reality that is important to their creators, hoping that viewers will comprehend it, but the use of unconventional techniques and structure may require a concerted effort at understanding on the part of a viewer—multiple viewings, for example, or even an explanation on the part of the filmmaker. Look, for example, at the unusual films written or directed by Charlie Kaufmann, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Being John Malkovich* (1999). Earlier films that might benefit from this approach to analysis include Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

A *contextualist* approach to analysis always considers a film as part of some broader context. This can be society at large (as in the aforementioned *symptomatic* interpretation); the particular culture, time, and place in which the film was created (a *culturalist* approach); or the director's personal life and previous body of work (an *auteurist* approach, which assumes that the director is the "author" of a film—that it is the product of a single filmmaker's imaginative talent, singular sensibility, and unifying vision, as evidenced in his cinematic *œuvre* to date). The *nationalist* approach investigates and discusses films in terms of their national character. The premise behind this approach is that different film cultures emerge with different characteristics in different nations, and, therefore, one must determine the social, cultural, and political condi-

tions that characterize the culture and how these conditions manifest themselves in what is portrayed on screen. A *psychological* approach often identifies plot or characters elements by using the theories of psychologists like Freud or Jung in a search for sexual symbolism, the treatment of the subconscious, representations of the id, ego, and superego, etc. A *generic* approach looks at a film as a representative of a genre, comparing it with other films from the same genre and finding meaning by identifying shared motifs or variations from the expected formula. This approach is especially useful when a film intentionally subverts or inverts various elements of traditional generic formulas. A generic analysis often benefits from a wider-reaching, contextual approach, since a substantial number of genre films (especially science-fiction films and westerns, but also others such as war films and historical dramas) incorporate intentional metaphors and symptomatic content relating to contemporary society at the time they were made.

Another way to examine a film in a certain context is to chronicle its *reception* by audiences and critics over the years, possibly in conjunction with one or more of the other approaches noted above. Some films were huge popular *and* critical successes when originally released, but were all but forgotten within a few years or perhaps a decade or two. Other films were virtually ignored when they first came out, but gradually gained viewer and critical acclaim to the point that they are now considered time-honored masterpieces or beloved favorites. It is possible that a film originally rejected by critics but popular with the viewing public gradually reversed such a position over the decades, so that now it is critically respected but largely disliked by the general public. Still other films provoke a certain amount of controversy, falling in and out of favor from one decade to another as popular or critical tastes change. Historical events and general shifts in popular attitudes, as well as cultural trends, over time may be related to such changes in a film's status. A variation on this survey of response to a film over the years is the *genetic* approach, which follows a film through all stages of its creation and release. This approach will examine and evaluate various drafts of the script and memos about changes or revisions during production, continuing through various cuts of the film made for preview audiences, theatrical release, re-edited rereleases, television and

video editions, and later “definitive” director’s cuts. Such an analysis may provide valuable insight into the artistic process and its relationship to commercial considerations, as well as make suggestions about the tastes, values, and general sophistication of target audiences.

A viewer can use any one or combination of these critical approaches to try to figure out just what a filmmaker is trying to say or imply in a work. Different approaches may embrace or totally ignore other approaches to come up with similar or completely opposite ideas about what a film really means. There may be as many different interpretations of a film as there are critics, but one thing is certain: examining a film from a variety of approaches could reveal aspects of its meaning that one never even considered while watching it for the first time. Of course, trying to use every approach to analyze a film would result in a book-length study. Any particular film may lend itself most easily to analysis through one or two specific approaches, with perhaps some consideration by means of one additional approach. In the end, writing a critical analysis, whether it is three pages long or twenty-five pages, requires narrowing down the scope of one’s coverage to only what seems most important about the film and most rewarding to discuss.

## **Preparing to Write about a Film**

Each writer may have an individualized approach to responding to, and writing about, a film, but all writers will work more effectively if they prepare to view the film *and* to write about it. Therefore, to recap, one should aim to:

***Investigate background information*** on the film one is writing about, such as the film’s historical, cultural, and stylistic contexts, or its production history. This kind of background material can prove useful in one’s analysis, evaluation, and general understanding of the film because, even if one’s assignment does not ask that one explicitly write about the film in relation to the era in which it was made, knowledge of that history will deepen one’s critical awareness of other aspects of the film. Examining the film as a process that has been shaped by different types of events—historical, contemporary, and individual or personal—can lead to one’s having one’s own ideas about the film.

***Explore the individual and collaborative factors*** that affected the film's final form so that one can better understand the aesthetic and cinematic decisions the director made. The final images one views on screen come from an extended creative process, involving the influence of the director, screenwriter, and cinematographer (among others), as well as the relevant conditions during the making of the film (including financing, casting, weather, illness, etc.).

***Find out who the film's director is and what other films he has made.*** By viewing some of the director's other films, one will have a better understanding of the film one is writing about as one develops a larger picture of the themes that have inspired the director, the genres and techniques he has preferred, and the consistency (or lack thereof) in storytelling method over the course of his career.

***Be selective in one's approach to elements of film composition,*** as production includes everything from lighting and sound, to wardrobe and editing, to special effects. The more specific the focus, the closer one can analyze one's chosen area of investigation and relate that analysis to a thesis about the particular cinematic work as a whole.

***Think comprehensively about the film's story and characters.*** Cinematic images do not merely represent a single dimension of a subject, such as just the narrative or just the characters. All feature films tell stories and have characters, but the way in which the narratives and their protagonists are presented to us can vary greatly in style, tone, and technique from film to film and filmmaker to filmmaker. Film analysis is concerned with *how* these various elements help tell the story and create the characters.

***Watch films with critical awareness,*** just as one would actively read and annotate a book one was preparing to write about; one should make note of a film's striking features and ask relevant questions. After an initial viewing, if possible one should watch the film a second time, taking notes and letting one's general, preliminary questions evolve into more specific ones. If one is writing about a film that one can view

only once, the initial groundwork will be essential to the success of one's paper. One should be aware, too, that doing research beforehand can play a significant role in freeing the viewer to experience the film with purposeful observation and informed note-taking.

***Guide oneself to a focused topic*** through one's questions, and continue to narrow one's approach as one decides which questions can be grouped together under a shared idea concerning the theme of the film, the function of its characters, or the nature of its technical and formal features.

## **Questions to Ask in Any Critical Assessment**

The following questions should help in one's critical evaluation of a film for an assigned essay. One should keep in mind, again, that sophisticated film, like sophisticated literature, requires more than one viewing to begin to appreciate its purpose beyond that of merely telling a story.

As one views a film, one should consider how the cuts, camera angles, shots, and movement work to create particular meanings. Think about how they establish space, privilege certain characters, suggest relationships, emphasize themes, or forward the narrative. In addition to shot distances, angles, editing, and camera movement, one should note details of the narrative, setting, characters, lighting, props, costume, and sound.

Ask oneself the following questions as one analyzes any film:

### **Background**

Who is the writer of the film? Has the screenplay been adapted from another work?

Who is the director?

When was the film made?

How might industrial, social, and economic factors have influenced the film's making? Did conditions in the filmmaking industry at the time limit the way in which the film could represent particular subjects? Does the film follow or critique the dominant ideologies of its period? Does it reflect and even shape particular cultural tensions?

## **Form/Narrative/Perspective**

What “happens” in the plot? In considering the narrative structure, note whether the film follows a standard chronological narrative, and how time is used. (That is, how is the story told: linearly; with flashbacks or flash-forwards; or episodically?) What are the key moments and how are they established? What are the climaxes and anti-climaxes? How far ahead is the audience in understanding what is happening to the characters than the characters themselves are? What propels the story forward? What is the pace of the narrative? How do earlier parts of the narrative set up later parts? Where do the key emotive moments occur—that is, when the audience is frightened, enraged, enraptured, avenged, etc.—and how has the narrative helped to establish these emotions on the part of the audience? Note when there is a *change of knowledge* (when characters or audience members become aware of new information) that shifts the *hierarchy of knowledge* (the relative amount of knowledge characters have, as opposed to what knowledge the audience has). Does the narrative have a coherence or unity, or does it leave the audience feeling unfulfilled or confused?

Is the film told, in general, from a particular character’s point of view, or is it “objective”? Is the film’s perspective primarily intellectual or emotional, visionary or realistic? Within the film, are particular shots shown from this or that character’s point of view (in a “subjective shot”), and how does the camera technically reinforce such a point of view? On whom is the audience meant to be focusing at particular moments?

What does the title mean in relation to the film as a whole? Consider alternative titles and why this particular title was chosen; also, consider any ambiguities in the title. The opening credits themselves establish a tone and often are used to foreshadow events, themes, or metaphors, so one should pay careful attention from the very beginning of any film. How are the opening credits presented? Are they connected to the film’s meaning in any way?

Why does the film’s action begin in the way that it does?

Are there any linguistic or visual motifs that are repeated during the film? What purpose do they serve?

Which three or four sequences are the most important in the film?  
Why?

Is sound used in any vivid ways to enhance the film's drama, heighten tension, disorient the viewer, etc.?

How does the film use color or light-and-dark to suggest tone and mood in different scenes?

Are there any striking uses of perspective (through camera angle or placement)? How does this relate to the meaning of the scene in question?

How and when are scenes cut? Is there any meaningful pattern to the way the editing is carried out?

What specific scene constitutes the film's climax? How does this scene resolve the central issue of the film?

Does the film leave any disunities or loose ends at its conclusion? If so, what does this suggest?

Why does the film conclude on this particular image and not some other one?

## **Theme**

What is the film's central theme, idea, or generative principle? That is, from an intellectual perspective, what is the motivating force behind the film?

Does the film present a clear-cut point-of-view on its particular subject? How so, and to what end?

Are there any aspects of the film's theme that are left ambiguous at the conclusion? Why?

How does this film measure up to literary texts you have read on the same subject?

## **Characterization**

Who are the central characters? How are minor characters used? Are characters thinly or fully drawn, and why? Who in the audience is meant to relate to which characters, and what sort of emotion (fear, pleasure, anxiety) are audience members meant to feel on account of this identification? Is there a clear-cut hero or villain, or do these figures remain ambivalent in the film? What values do the characters represent, and do the characters change in the course of the action? Are the characters meant to play a particular "type" and do they play

*against* type at any time? Do different characters use different kinds of language? Do certain characters speak through their silences?

What is the acting style of the performers: mannered (“classical”); intense and psychologically driven (“Method”); or less affected and more “natural”? Do particular actors have their own recognizable style or type, and how do the filmmakers integrate the various acting styles of different performers? What expectations do audiences have of “star” actors? Do the stars, in this instance, fulfill or challenge the expectations of the audience as they perform their roles?

### ***Mise-en-scène/Montage***

Is the setting realistic or stylized? What atmosphere does the setting suggest? Do particular objects in the setting serve a symbolic function? Does the setting itself serve such a function?

How are the characters costumed and made up? What does their clothing or makeup reveal about their social standing, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age? How do costume and makeup convey character? How are characters contrasted by means of costume?

What in the film is well-illuminated and what is in shadow? How does the lighting scheme shape our perception of character, space, or mood? How are colors used? Is there a pattern or scheme to the use of color? That is, is color used symbolically in the film?

What shot distances are used? Does one notice a movement from longer to closer shots? When in particular are the various shot distances used (e.g., the opening of a scene, during a conversation, etc.)? What purposes do the long shots, medium shots, and close-ups serve?

How do camera angles function? How do they shape the audience’s view of characters, spaces, or actions?

How do camera movements function? What information do they provide about characters, objects, and locations? Do the camera movements guide the viewer’s eye toward particular details? Do they align the viewer’s perspective with that of a character?

Editing (“cuts”) creates continuities (or discontinuities), juxtapositions, and overall narrative structure in a film. What types of cuts are used? How are the cuts used: to establish rhythm, shift the viewer between characters, create transitions between spaces, mark the passage

of time? Does the film's editing comment on the relationships between characters or spaces?

What is the purpose of the film's music? How does it direct our attention within the image? How does it shape our interpretation of the image? How are sound (including dialogue) and sound effects used, in general, in the film?

Was the film shot in a studio, on a soundstage, or was it shot on location? How is the setting integrated into the action, both the larger background of that setting and its smaller foreground (including props)? How is the setting used in composing shots (verticals and horizontals, windows and doors, shades and mirrors, etc.)? How do particular settings (a vast mountain range, a cluttered urban setting) function as signs in order to convey narrative or psychological information to the viewer?

## Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Discuss the extent to which several of the “serious” films in this book subvert or re-deploy the following “popular” narrative elements: melodrama, sentimentality, romance, and comedy or comic relief.
2. Using examples from your own viewing experience as well as the films discussed in this book, compare and contrast the commercial-industrial model of cinema with the aesthetic-artisanal model. Be sure to include in your answer a consideration of the following issues: globalization and cultural hybridity versus cultural specificity; federal subsidy versus private financing; film as a “total work of art” versus film as the most financially profitable form of entertainment; professional acting versus amateur or nonprofessional performance; and *auteurist* vision versus assembly-line production.
3. “The Hollywood film has traditionally been one of action and clear-cut values, the European film one of character and moral ambiguities.” Discuss the extent to which the following three Hollywood films are, or aren’t, exceptions to this “rule: *Greed*, *On the Waterfront*, and *The Graduate*. As you compose your answer, be sure also to refer to some of the European films treated in this book: *Day of Wrath* and *Sundays and Cybèle*, for example.
4. “The Japanese film is one concerned with the circumstances that

surround a human being.” Discuss the extent to which the Japanese film discussed in *Close Watching*, *The Seven Samurai*, embodies or does not embody this “rule,” and compare/contrast Kurosawa’s picture with its American remake, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

5. Comment upon the use of the child as a dramatic device in *Miracle in Milan* and *Sundays and Cybèle*. How are children characterized in these films, as opposed to conventional or commercial movies, and how are they deployed to advance the “adult” narratives?
6. Compare and contrast the comic the comic *The Graduate*, with the tragic *Day of Wrath* as dramas of adultery.
7. Discuss the extent to which visual style creates thematic meaning in two of the following three films: *Nosferatu*, *Day of Wrath*, and *L'Argent*.
8. Discuss the significance of the titles of three of the following five films: *Room at the Top*, *L'Âge d'or*, *Closely Watched Trains*, *L'Argent*, and *(The) Seven Samurai*.
9. Discuss the extent to which documentary principles influenced the conception and shooting of such an otherwise fictional work as *On the Waterfront*.
10. Describe the degree to which two of the following five films—*Nosferatu*, *Day of Wrath*, *The Seven Samurai*, *Room at the Top*, and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*—can, or cannot, be considered tragedies, if tragedy (as opposed to pathos) is understood as a form characterized by individual pain or suffering leading to sacrificial decay, defeat, death, or destruction; by fear, misery, and terror; by exceptionality and isolation; by an inevitability or irremediableness that may take on metaphysical implications; by enervation and catharsis; and by internal division on the part of the protagonist, culminating in fatal error and finally self-awareness or “recognition.”
11. Compare and contrast the following characters: von Bohm from *Lola* and Absalon from *Day of Wrath*.
12. In the movies, point of view tends to be less rigorous than in fiction, for fiction films tend to fall naturally into the omniscient form. Using examples from the films treated in this book, discuss how omniscient narration—as opposed to first-person, third-person, or objective narration—is almost inevitable in fiction film.

13. Comment, from a social as well as an artistic point of view, on the relationship between the rise of the Internet and the decline worldwide in the number of movie theaters. Related to this question, how do changes in technology affect the nature of film and of film spectatorship?
14. What should one study at university if one wishes oneself to become a creator of film art?
15. Elaborate on the following statement: “Every film is a fiction film.”
16. What is the relationship between filmgoing and visual perception in general?
17. What are the implications of the replacement of reel (acetate) film by digital film?
18. What can film do that other art forms cannot do, or what can film do better than other art forms? That is, what makes movies “cinematic”? What separates film from theater and from literature? Use examples from the films treated in this book to illustrate your points.
19. Is film at its best a record of reality, a realistic medium, or a way to alter reality, a formalist and even fantasy-driven medium? Related to this question, are movies products of their culture, or do they shape that culture?
20. Compare and contrast the following: the love triangles in *Sundays and Cybèle* and *Greed*.
21. The following eleven films are adaptations from fiction or drama: *Nosferatu*, *Greed*, *Day of Wrath*, *Room at the Top*, *Miracle in Milan*, *Sundays and Cybèle*, *Closely Watched Trains*, *Love*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *The Graduate*, and *L'Argent*. Read the original source of at least two of these films and then describe why you prefer it to the film version made of it, or vice versa. As you compose your answer, consider which of the following two questions you would choose to ask, and why: “How does the adaptation of fiction and drama for the screen serve the cinema?”; or, “How does such film adaptation serve literature and the theater?”
22. What is the difference between film analysis and film criticism? What is the difference between film history and film theory? Which is more important, film theory or film criticism? Are they equally important, or equally unimportant, in the end?

23. Discuss the role of religion—that is, how it impacts the film’s drama—in *Day of Wrath* and *On the Waterfront*, each of which features a pastor or priest as a major character.
24. Pier Paolo Pasolini has maintained that the cinema is a vehicle far more suited to the transmission of myth than either poetry or prose because its images can reproduce physical reality at the same time that they are larger than life; because, like myths, dreams, and fairy tales, film can move fluidly through time and space and shift emotional tones just as fluidly; and because, even as myth exists both outside and inside history and arrives at universals through particulars, so does the cinema transcend a national language of words by means of the international language of images and transform the reality of those images into an iconography of the human psyche. In your view, which films treated in *Close Watching* are the most mythic—and which are the least?
25. Which artistic form do you prefer more, the theater or the cinema, and why?
26. Choose one of the following statements and defend it: (1) violent films tend to create violent tendencies in spectators who habitually view them; (2) violent films tend to purge the violent tendencies of spectators who habitually view them.
27. Compare and contrast the following two war films: *The Seven Samurai* and *Closely Watched Trains*.
28. Describe the function of “telescoping” (setting a film’s action in the past but intending that action as a comment upon the world of the present, outside the film at the time it was made) in three of the following seven works: *Greed*, *Day of Wrath*, *Closely Watched Trains*, *Love*, *Nosferatu*, *Lola*, and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*.
29. In what sense is film an art? What is the “language” of film art? Who is the artist behind an individual film?
30. Compare and contrast *L’Âge d’or* and *The Graduate* as films about *l’amour fou*, or “mad love.”
31. Any writer’s film criticism is, should be, and cannot help but be subjective—that is, subject to alteration over time in its judgments or opinions. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Is the quality of film criticism itself in decline, now that anyone and every-

one can become a film critic by publishing his or her work, without editorial control, on the Internet? Or will film criticism ultimately be enriched by its democratic, “immediate” practice online?

32. How do audiences react to and interpret what they see on the screen? Are filmgoers actually shaped by what they see, or do they do the shaping themselves, through the expression of their movie preferences at the box office?
33. Charlton Heston once said, “The trouble with film as a business is that it’s an art. The trouble with film as an art is that it’s a business.” Explain how this contradiction affects the making of movies.
34. Compare and contrast the happy endings of *Miracle in Milan* and *The Graduate* for their formal as well as thematic appropriateness.
35. The French director Robert Bresson once said, “The soundtrack invented silence.” Choose a scene or sequence from the following two films—*On the Waterfront* and *L’Argent*—and discuss how, in each instance, the narrative is developed, if not in silence, then without, or almost without, dialogue. That is, discuss how the story is told in these excerpts more through cinematic means—images and sound—than through words.
36. The classical Hollywood editing style seeks to be “invisible.” What does this mean? Describe the characteristics of the “invisible” style of Hollywood filmmaking. Your response should include references to stylistic features such as *mise-en-scène* and editing.
37. The Hollywood studio system—developed in the 1910s and 1920s from the industrial model created by Henry Ford—helped American film art to develop but it also hindered that art’s development. Discuss those aspects of the system that helped the development of film art and those aspects that hindered it.
38. Since the cinema is defined by technology, it has always been influenced by technological changes and will continue to be influenced by them. What are some of these technological changes, and what impact do you think they had on past films, are having on film now, and will have on future films as well?
39. What makes a filmmaker independent? Can a filmmaker be truly independent? Provide examples of filmmakers and their films that you believe to be “independent.”

40. A number of older black-and-white films have undergone a digital process called colorization. The people who have done this claim that colorization increases audience enjoyment of the films, while colorization's critics claim that it damages audience appreciation. What is your view, and why?

41. Discuss the philosophical concept of existentialism—the idea that the individual is a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will (apart from issues of class and socio-economic status)—as it applies to the major character(s) of *L'Argent*, being sure at the same time to describe the historical moment out of which this film arises.

42. Construct an eclectic or all-embracing theory of film (as opposed to a narrowly realistic, formalistic, or politicized one) that would allow for any motion picture of artistic quality, no matter what its form, style, or content.

43. Choose three of the following twelve descriptive phrases and discuss the extent to which they are helpful in analyzing and understanding film art, and the extent to which such phrases are restrictive, reductive, or even distortive. The phrases are: Classical Hollywood Cinema; German Expressionism; French Surrealist Cinema; Italian Neorealism; French New Wave; British Social Realism; New American Cinema; Czech Renaissance; New German Cinema; and New Australian Cinema.

44. The critic Vernon Young once said, “Film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film’s total effect.” Orson Welles himself once wrote, “I don’t understand how movies exist independently of the actor—I truly don’t.” With which man do you concur and why?

45. Agree or disagree with the following statement by the scholar Roger Manvell: “Film scripts are frequently published, but it is evident that very few of them can rank as literature.”

46. Discuss *On the Waterfront* as a political film behind which looms, directly or indirectly, the specter of communism.

47. Discuss the extent to which two of the following four films can be considered vile or subversive works of art, as opposed to the ameliorative, socially constructive kind: *L'Âge d'or*, *Sundays and Cybèle*, *The Graduate*, and *Lola*.

48. Discuss the extent to which one of the following three films may be considered, on the one hand, a melodrama in which the line between good and evil is clearly drawn, and, on the other hand, a complex tale in which neither side is completely virtuous or completely villainous: *On the Waterfront*, *Room at the Top*, and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*.
49. Discuss the role of comedy in such ostensibly thematically serious films as *Closely Watched Trains* and *The Graduate*.
50. Discuss whether the sentiment or sentimentality in such films as *Love* and *Sundays and Cybèle* is “earned” or unearned.
51. Italian neorealist films were often criticized for describing the symptoms of social problems rather than probing their causes; they were often attacked for not examining the revolutionary implications of the question, “What next?” Discuss whether *Miracle in Milan* is an example of such a neorealist film—particularly in light of its comic-fantastic point of view.
52. Discuss the use of Christian symbolism or reference in two of the following three films: *Miracle in Milan*, *On the Waterfront*, and *L'Argent*.
53. Compare and contrast the following two works as socially realistic films: *On the Waterfront* and *Room at the Top*. That is to say, what is the social situation or social problem in each film, how is it dramatized, and who are the main characters and *why* are they the main characters?
54. Delineate the role of the *Doppelgänger* (double, second self, alter ego, or “evil twin”) not only in the development of the action of *Nosferatu*, but also in the *Doppelgänger*-motif’s support for the thesis that there were underlying affinities between Weimar cinema’s power-crazed protagonists and the fascist mentality that gave rise to Adolf Hitler.
55. Compare and contrast the following characters: Miloš Hrma from *Closely Watched Trains* and Benjamin Braddock from *The Graduate*.

## Glossary of Basic Film Terms

**Aerial shot.** A shot from above, usually made from a plane, helicopter, or crane.

**Ambient sound.** Sound that emanates from the ambience (or background) of the setting or environment being filmed.

**Art director.** The person responsible for a film's set design, color scheme, and graphics. Also known as "production designer."

**Art houses.** Small theaters that sprang up in the major cities of the United States during the 1950s to show "art films" as opposed to "commercial movies."

**Aspect ratio.** The relationship between the frame's two dimensions: the width of the image to its height.

**Associative editing.** The cutting together of shots to establish their metaphoric or symbolic—as opposed to their narrative—relationship.

**Asynchronous sound.** Sound that does not have its source in the film image.

**Auteur.** A director or other creative intelligence with a recognizable and distinctive style who is considered the prime "author" of a film.

**Available lighting.** The use of only that light which actually exists on location, either natural (the sun) or artificial (household lamps).

**Back-lighting.** Lighting in which the main source of illumination is directed towards the camera, thus tending to throw the subject into silhouette.

**Bird's-eye view.** A shot in which the camera photographs a scene from directly overhead.

**Blocking.** Physical and spatial relationships among figures and settings in the frame.

**Cinematographer.** The director of photography, who is responsible for the camera technique and the lighting of the film in production.

**Close-up.** A detailed view of a person or object, usually without much context provided.

**Continuity.** The kind of logic implied in the association of ideas between edited shots. “Cutting to continuity” emphasizes smooth transitions between shots, in which space and time are unobtrusively condensed. “Classical cutting” emphasizes dramatic or emotional logic between shots rather than one based strictly on considerations of time and space. In “thematic montage” the continuity is based entirely on ideas, irrespective of literal time and space. In some instances, “continuity” refers to the space-time continuum of reality before it is photographed.

**Contrapuntal sound.** Sound that counterpoints, or contrasts with, the image.

**Crane shot.** A shot taken from a special device called a crane, which resembles a huge mechanical arm. The crane carries the camera and cameraman, and can move in virtually any direction.

**Cross-cutting.** The alternating of shots from two sequences, often in different locales, to suggest that the sequences are taking place simultaneously.

**Cut.** A direct change from one shot to another, i.e., the precise point at which shot A ends and shot B begins.

**Dailies, or rushes.** Synchronized picture/sound workprints of a day’s shooting that can be studied by the director, editor, and other crew members before the next day’s shooting begins.

**Deep focus, or depth of field.** A technique of photography that permits all distance planes to remain clearly in focus, from close-up range to infinity.

**Dialectical montage.** A form of editing pioneered by the Soviet film theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, in which shots “collide” or noticeably conflict with each other. Editing of this kind is based on

the Marxist concept of dialectical materialism, which posits the history of human society as the history of the struggle between the classes. Also known as “intellectual montage.”

**Digital effects.** Effects created directly by the use of computer imaging, so that the actual film image is generated or manipulated by computer software. Also known as CGI (computer-generated imagery).

**Direct sound.** Sound effects, conversations, music, or noise recorded simultaneously as the film is being shot.

**Dissolve, or lap dissolve.** These terms refer to the slow fading out of one shot and the gradual fading in of its successor, with a superimposition of images, usually at the midpoint.

**Dolly shot, tracking shot, or traveling shot.** A shot taken from a moving vehicle. Originally tracks were laid on the set to permit a smoother movement of the camera.

**Double exposure.** A special effect in which one shot is superimposed over another; may be expanded to a multiple-exposure.

**Dubbing.** The addition of sound after the visuals have been photographed. Also called postsynchronization.

**Editing.** The joining of one shot (strip of film) with another. The shots can picture events and objects in different places at different times. Editing is sometimes also called montage.

**Editor.** The person who supervises the cutting or splicing together of the shots of a film into their final structure.

**Establishing shot.** Usually a long shot or extreme long shot offered at the beginning of a scene or sequence and providing the viewer with the context of the subsequent closer shots. Also known as “master shot.”

**External sound.** A form of sound that comes from a place within the film’s narrative, which we and the characters in the scene hear but whose source we do not see.

**Extreme close-up.** A minutely detailed view of an object or a person. An extreme close-up of an actor generally includes only his eyes or mouth.

**Extreme long shot.** A panoramic view of an exterior location photographed from a great distance, often as far as a quarter of a mile away.

**Eye-level shot.** The placement of the camera approximately five to six feet from the ground, corresponding to the height of an observer on the scene and implying neutrality with respect to the camera's attitude toward the subject being photographed.

**Fade.** A fade-in occurs when a dark screen gradually brightens to reveal a shot. A fade-out occurs when a shot gradually darkens to become a black screen.

**Fast motion.** Photography that accelerates action by photographing it at a filming rate less than the normal twenty-four frames-per-second and then projecting it at normal speed, so that it takes place cinematically at a more rapid rate.

**Feature.** The main film in a program of several films, or any film over four reels in length. Standard theatrical feature length is ninety to 120 minutes.

**Film noir.** Literally, “black film,” a French term for films, beginning in the 1940s, that share certain “dark” characteristics such as sordid urban atmospheres, low-key lighting, actual nighttime shooting, shady characters, and plots dealing with illicit passions and violent crimes.

**Filmography.** A listing of films, their directors, and their dates; similar to a bibliography.

**Final cut.** The final edited version of a film, created by mixing soundtracks, inserting the desired optical or special effects, fine-tuning the movie’s rhythm, balancing small details and the bigger picture, bringing out subtleties and masking flaws, and approving the fidelity and acoustic quality of the mixed sound.

**Fish-eye lens.** An extreme wide-angle lens, which distorts the image so radically that the edges seem wrapped into a sphere.

**Flashback.** An editing technique that suggests the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the past.

**Flash-forward.** An editing technique that suggests the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the future.

**Frame.** The smallest compositional unit of film structure, the frame is the individual photographic image both in projection and on the film strip. This term also designates the boundaries of the image as an anchor for the visual composition.

**Freeze frame.** An optical effect in which action appears to come to a dead stop, achieved by printing a single frame of motion-picture film many times in succession.

**Full shot.** A type of long shot that includes the human body in full, with the head near the top of the frame and the feet near the bottom.

**Handheld shot.** A shot in which the cameraman holds the camera and moves through space while filming.

**High-angle shot.** A shot in which the subject is photographed from above.

**High-key lighting.** Lighting that results in more light areas than shadows; subjects are seen in middle grays and highlights, with little contrast.

**In-camera effects.** One category of special effects. This kind is created in the regular or production camera on the original negative and includes such effects as the dolly zoom and split screen.

**Iris shot.** The expansion or contraction of a small circle within the darkened frame to open or close a shot or scene.

**Jump cut.** A cut that jumps forward within a single action, thus creating a sense of discontinuity on account of the temporal ellipsis.

**Long shot.** Includes an amount of picture within the frame that roughly corresponds to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch in the live theater.

**Long take.** A shot of lengthy duration, sometimes called a sequence shot.

**Loose framing.** Usually found in full-to-long shots. The *mise-en-scène* is so spaciously distributed that the subject photographed has considerable latitude of movement.

**Low-angle shot.** A shot in which the subject is photographed from below.

**Low-key lighting.** Lighting that puts most of the set in shadow and uses just a few highlights to define the subject.

**Match cut.** A cut that links two different shots through continuous sound or action.

**Matte shot.** A shot that is partially opaque in the frame area so that it can be printed together with another frame, masking unwanted

content and allowing for the addition of another scene on a reverse matte. In a “traveling matte shot” the contours of the opaque areas can be varied from frame to frame.

**Medium shot.** A relatively close shot, revealing a moderate amount of detail. A medium shot of a figure generally includes the body from the knees or waist up.

**Metteur-en-scène.** Term used in *auteur* theory to describe a director who is technically competent but whose work does not possess the broader thematic, aesthetic, and psychological dimensions of the *auteur*.

**Mise-en-scène.** The arrangement of objects, figures, and masses within a given space. In the cinema, that space is defined by the frame; in the live theater, usually by the proscenium arch. *Mise-en-scène* includes all the means available to a film director to express his attitude toward his subject. This takes in the placement of the actors in the setting or décor, their costumes and make-up, the angle and distance of the camera, camera movement as well as movement within the frame, the lighting, the pattern of color, and even the editing or cutting.

**Mixing.** The work of the sound editor, who refines, balances, and combines different soundtracks.

**Montage.** Transitional sequences of rapidly edited images, used to suggest the lapse of time or the passing of events. Often employs dissolves and multiple exposures.

**Negative.** A photographic image on transparent material in which light and dark shades are inverted; makes possible the reproduction of the image.

**Negative space.** Empty or unfilled space in the *mise-en-scène*, often acting as a foil to the more detailed elements in a shot.

**Oblique angle.** A shot that is photographed by a tilted, as opposed to horizontal, camera. When the image is projected on the screen, the subject itself seems to be tilted on its side, thus giving the viewer the impression that the world in the frame is out of balance. Also known as “Dutch angle” or “canted framing.”

**Omniscient point of view.** The most basic and common point of view in the cinema. “Omniscient” means “all-knowing,” and in film,

the camera has complete or unlimited perception of events. The camera thus can maintain the status of an all-knowing observer even as it presents various restricted perspectives as the narrative evolves.

**180-degree system.** The fundamental means by which filmmakers maintain consistent screen direction, orienting the viewer and ensuring a sense of the cinematic space in which the action occurs. The system assures two things: the action within a scene will always advance along a straight line, either from left to right or from the right to the left of the frame; and the camera will remain consistently on one side of the action. Also known as the “180-degree rule,” “the axis of action,” and the “center line.”

**Outtakes.** Material not used in the final cut of a film that is catalogued and saved.

**Overexposure.** Occurs when too much light enters the aperture of a camera lens, bleaching out the image.

**Over-the-shoulder shot.** A medium shot, useful in dialogue scenes, in which one actor is photographed head-on from over the shoulder of another actor.

**Pan.** A camera movement during which the body of the camera, which is otherwise stationary, turns to the left or right on its own axis. Onscreen this produces a mobile framing, or a constant re-framing, that scans the space horizontally.

**Parallel action.** A device of narrative construction in which the development of two pieces of action is presented alternately so as to suggest that they are occurring simultaneously.

**Persistence of vision.** Often called the physiological foundation of the cinema: an image remains on the retina of the eye for a short period of time after it disappears from the actual field of vision; when a successive image replaces it immediately, as on a moving strip of film, the illusion of continuous motion is produced.

**Point-of-view shot.** Any shot that is taken from the vantage point of a character in the film, showing what the character sees.

**Process shot, or rear projection.** A technique in which a background scene is projected onto a translucent screen behind the actors in the studio, so that it appears the actors are being photographed on location in the final image.

**Pull-back dolly.** A technique used to surprise the viewer by withdrawing from a scene to reveal an object or character that was previously out of the frame.

**Rack focusing, or selective focusing.** The changing of focus from one subject to another during a shot, guiding the audience's attention to a new, sharply delineated point of interest while the previous one blurs.

**Reaction shot.** A cut to a shot of a character's reaction to the contents of the preceding shot.

**Reverse-angle shot.** A shot taken from an angle 180° opposed to the previous shot—that is, the camera is placed opposite its previous position.

**Reverse motion.** Shooting a subject so that the action runs backward—achieved by running the camera itself backwards (spooling the film from bottom to top rather than from top to bottom); by turning the camera upside down (so long as the film is double-sprocketed) and then turning the processed film end over end; or by running the film backward through an optical printer.

**Score.** The musical soundtrack for a film.

**Scene.** A complete unit of film plot composed of one shot or a number of interrelated shots, unified usually by a central concern—a location, an incident, or a minor dramatic climax.

**Screen test.** A short filming undertaken by an actor who is trying out for a particular role.

**Sequence.** A series of shots or scenes joined in such a way that they constitute a significant part of a film's dramatic structure.

**Setup.** One camera position and everything associated with it. While the shot is the basic building block of a film, the setup is the basic component of the film's production.

**Shallow focus.** A shot in which only objects and persons in the foreground of the image can be seen clearly.

**Shot.** Those images that are recorded continuously from the time the camera starts to the time it stops: that is, an unedited, uncut strip of film. The shot is the basic signifying unit of film structure.

**Slow motion.** Shots of a subject photographed at a faster rate than twenty-four frames-per-second, which, when projected at the standard rate, produce a dreamy, dancelike slowness of action.

**Soft focus.** A visual effect in which the image seems somewhat hazy and not sharply defined, achieved by shooting with the lens slightly out of focus or shooting through a special lens, filter, or gauze.

**Sound bridge.** Sound carried from a first shot over to the next before the sound of that second shot begins. Also known as “sound transition.”

**Sound design.** A concept combining the crafts of editing and mixing and representing advocacy for movie sound (to counter people’s tendency to favor the movie image).

**Special effects.** A term used to describe a range of synthetic processes used to enhance or manipulate the filmic image. They include optical effects such as rear projection; mechanical or physical effects such as explosions or fires; makeup effects such as the use of blood bags and prosthetics; and digital effects.

**Split screen.** A visual composition in which the frame is divided into two separate images not superimposed over one another.

**Still.** A photograph that re-creates a scene from a film for publicity purposes, or a single-frame enlargement from a film that looks like a photograph.

**Stop-motion photography.** A technique used for trick photography and special effects in which one frame is exposed at a time so that the subject can be adjusted between frames.

**Subtext.** A term used in drama and film to signify the dramatic implications beneath the language of a play or movie. Often the subtext concerns ideas and emotions that are totally independent of the language of a script.

**Subjective shot, or subjective camera.** A shot that represents the point of view of a character. Often a reverse-angle shot, preceded by a shot of the character.

**Superimposition.** The simultaneous appearance of two or more images over one another in the same frame.

**Swish pan.** A shot in which the camera pans, or moves horizontally, so fast that the image is blurred. Also known as “zip pan.”

**Synchronous sound.** Sound that has its source in the film image, where it is clearly identified.

**Take.** A director shoots one or more versions of each shot in a given setup, only one of which appears in the final version of the film; each of these versions is a take.

**Telephoto lens, or long lens.** A lens that acts as a telescope, magnifying the size of objects at a great distance. A significant side effect is its tendency to flatten perspective.

**Tight framing.** Usually in close shots. The *mise-en-scène* is so carefully balanced and harmonized that the subject photographed has little or no freedom of movement.

**Tilt.** The vertical movement of the camera from a stationary position—for example, resting on a tripod.

**Two-reeler.** A film running 30 minutes, the standard length of early silent comedies.

**Two-shot.** A medium shot, featuring two actors.

**Viewfinder.** On a camera, the small window through which one looks when taking a picture: the frame indicates the boundaries of the camera's point of view.

**Voice-over.** Commentary on the soundtrack by an unseen character or narrator.

**Wide-angle lens, or short lens.** A lens that permits the camera to photograph a wider area than a normal lens. A significant side effect is its tendency to exaggerate perspective. Also used for deep-focus photography.

**Wipe.** An editing device, usually a line that travels across the screen, “pushing off” one image and revealing another.

**Zoom lens/shot.** A lens of variable focal length that permits the cameraman to change from wide-angle to telephoto shots (and vice versa) in one continuous movement. The lens changes focal length in such a way during a zoom shot that a dolly or crane shot is suggested.

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